Interview with Ambassador Elliott Percival Skinner

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

Ralph J. Bunch Legacy: Minority Officers

AMBASSADOR ELLIOTT PERCIVAL SKINNER

Interviewed by: Celestine Tutt

Initial interview date: April 8, 1981

Q: This is an oral history interview with Dr. Elliott Percival Skinner, an educator, scholar, writer and diplomat. He is presently the Franz Boas professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in the city of New York, where he specializes in African Ethnology. Dr. Skinner is former United States Ambassador to the Republic of Upper Volta, having served in that capacity from 1966 to 1969. He has written extensively on Africa, and his volume entitled African Urban Life: The Transformation of Ouagadougou, published by Princeton University Press, was winner of the Herskovitz Award for the best book by an American on Africa for 1975. His latest book, co-edited with William A. Shack, is entitled Strangers in African Societies and published by the University of California Press, at Berkeley, 1979. His current research at the Wilson Center of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC deals with blacks and U.S. policy towards Africa, 1871-1960. This interview is being sponsored by the Phelps-Stokes Fund as part of an oral history project on Black Chiefs of Mission. The interview is a first in a series. It is being held on Saturday, August 8, 1981, in New York City. Celestine Tutt, interviewer.

SKINNER: The first question dealing with the events which led to my entry into the diplomatic service is the subject of some speculation and oral tradition. I had studied in Upper . Volta as an anthropologist from October 1955 until January 1957. During that period I did field work in the area of Nob#r#, in the southern part of Upper Volta, on migration of people to the Ivory Coast and the Cold Coast, primarily interested in the effect of that migration on the whole communities.

I went back to Upper Volta in 1960, where I witnessed the independence of that nation state and later returned in 1962 under the auspices of Crossroads Africa, founded by James Robinson. I led a group of students to Ouagadougou, where we built a school and where I had come into contact with Ambassador Estes and Thomas Quinn, who was then the director of the United States Information Service. The Ambassador and Fred in a way exploited our presence in Ouagadougou to win or cement friendships with the President, Maurice Yam#ogo , who came out to the site where we were building a school, and, of course, being a Mor# speaker, Mor# being the language of the Mossi, that was quite something for the Ambassador and, of course, for the President.

And at that point in time the Embassy had almost no information of a serious sort on the Mossi, and I was still in the process of writing up my field project, especially that aspect of the study dealing with the political organization of the Mossi people. And the Ambassador asked me whether or not he could see the draft of the manuscript, to give him some idea as to the nature of the polity. I agreed and we became friendly. And when I got back to the States, I kept up a relationship with the State Department, specifically through the African Section of the Foreign Service Training Institute, over in Arlington Towers, Virginia, where every three months or so a new class of persons going to Africa would be given a series of lectures. I became then a “sometime” lecturer on African ethnology for those people.

So I kept up that relationship, and I went back to Africa in 1964, where I did a study on African urbanization, the transformation of Ouagadougou. I lived then in Ouagadougou itself for about six months and while there I, again, saw the Ambassador fairly often. We

became fairly good friends, but I remember he was quite shocked at my reaction to the ... the assassination of-the death of a missionary — I think his name was Carson or Carlson — who was killed about '64 in Stanleyville in the Congo, now Zaire. The Africans felt that, although a missionary, that this man was part of the intelligence network. Being not only cynical but understanding the nature of the interaction between missionaries as Americans or just missionaries as people with certain information, just wanting to talk to another American when that American showed up in his or her bailiwick, I had no doubt that the missionary, who may not have been a CIA agent, (even though later on that became a subject of a great deal of concern, I think President Johnson or one of the presidents having then to give specific orders that CIA should not recruit missionaries) may have given information to our government.

I was fairly sympathetic to the possibility that this man was not as innocent as Ambassador Estes felt. And he ... the Ambassador got very upset that I would suggest that perhaps this was something the U.S. Government ought to look into. Anyway, apparently he didn't hold that against me, although I feel that he was upset about it. So when Maurice Yam#ogo came to the United States, I think in 1965, through Ambassador Estes, I think, or somebody in the State Department, my wife and I were invited to the White House to dinner on behalf of Maurice Yam#ogo and his wife, who were visiting the United States officially at that time.

Now the sequence in line was President Johnson, President Yam#ogo and their wives and so on. Dean Rusk was there and so was Ambassador Estes. As I came through the line, I greeted the Ambassador, President Johnson and President Yam#ogo and I told him, “Welcome to the home of my chief,” which was President Johnson, and, of course, everybody (slight laugh)...was sort of flabbergasted about what was taking place. See, I was talking Mor# to President Yam#ogo, and the oral tradition has it, although I have no way of verifying this, that President Johnson turned to Dean Rusk and said, “Make that

man Ambassador.” Anyway, I was oblivious to that and, as you know, I came back to Hew York and Maurice Yam#ogo fell from power on the 3rd of January, 1966.

Around May of 1966, one Saturday morning, I was in my office and the phone rang and the woman said, “This is the secretary of the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk. Are you Elliott Skinner?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Well, the Secretary would like to talk to you.” So I said, “Fine.” Then he said, “Dr. Skinner, I see you work on Saturdays.” I said, “Mr. Secretary, I see you work on Saturdays, also.” (laughs) He said, “Well, when do you get to Washington?” I said, “Well, I come down, oh, about once every two months or so to lecture to a class in the Foreign Service Institute.” He said, “Well, the next time you come down, come and talk to me. And when you come down, come to the C Street entrance and just say that you have an appointment with me.” And I said, “Fine.” And he said, “Well, I'll see you, Dr. Skinner.”

I hung up and then it felt good to me that I had spoken to the Secretary of State. That, of course, was something unusual, so I walked around the department and the only person working that Saturday was Marvin Harris, professor of Anthropology at Columbia. And I said, “Marvin, I just spoke to the Secretary of State.” He said, “What?” I said, “Well, I think 1 did.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “I think so.” He said, “Well, let me check on this.” So he called up the operator in Low Library and she said, “Yeah?” He said, “Well, did Dr. Skinner get a call from Washington?” She said, “Yeah.” Ile said, “Well, I guess you spoke to the Secretary.” He said, “Well, what's it all about?” I said, “Well, he said I should come down and talk to him.” He said, “Well, that's good!”

Now this was a surprise to me, because Marvin was part of the anti-Vietnam clique at Columbia and I was intrigued that he would say, fine. Anyway, I just went back to my office and worked. I went over to Chock full o'Nuts for lunch, and then I saw my wife busily heading towards Columbia. I hailed her and she said, “Well, you got a call from the State Department.” I said, “Well, I don't know. I think I've got to see the Secretary.”

Well, by this time I had begun to put two and two together. Hugh Smythe was our Ambassador to Syria. I knew that Franklin Williams was Ambassador to Ghana, and Mercer Cook was, I think, our Ambassador to Niger and was now in Senegal. So I said perhaps time had come for me to be Ambassador, in which case then, fine.

So I did go on down to Washington when I had to lecture for Ann Reid. And when I got there that morning, over in Arlington Towers, I saw one of the directors or one of the individuals involved with the Foreign Service Institute. And he said, “How are things?” I said, “Well, I think I'm about to have an appointment today with the Secretary of State.” Ile said, “You do?” I said, “Yeah, I think so.” So it was a way of making conversation. I didn't realize that for those guys it was-this was something unusual.

So I was lecturing (slight laugh) ... and on the platform I saw Ann Reid, who was directing the African Program, she came up and said, in front of everybody, about a hundred persons, “Dr. Skinner, you have to see the Secretary of State, no, you were supposed to see the Secretary of State ten o'clock this morning, but I told him that you had a lecture then. (laughs) And he said, fine, that you can come out at three o'clock when you get through.”

I said to myself, “damn”, you know, this ... She was flustered, obviously. The way I reconstructed it, she had a chance to get herself before the people on the Seventh floor [of the State Department]. In her anxiety to probably make brownie points, that one of her persons had to see the Secretary or something like that, she put off my appointment (laughs)... So I had to wait then until three o'clock. And then I...I...at three o'clock I went over and, of course, she was very solicitous of all of this. She took me directly to the Seventh floor and delivered me in person, (laughs) very, very excited... (laughs).

And so I got in. I saw the Secretary and he said, “How are things at Columbia, Professor?” We started talking; we talked. He was a professor, and it was very professorial. And then he said, “President Johnson would like you to consider serving the United States as

Ambassador to Upper Volta. What do you think?" I said, "Well..." He said, "You don't have to think about... you don't have to give me the answer right away. You can discuss it with your wife and family and talk to me about it. "Well, no, I can... I think it would be an honor to do that and I can give you the answer now." He said, "Fine. We'll be getting in touch with you."

But, of course, he called his secretary and sent me back to National in the longest car I had ridden in for....ever before, and I felt, well, no, this is not bad. And, of course, I saw nobody on the way to the airport. So no one knew then I was in this big car. Anyway, I got back and began to... Well, the people at Columbia I suspect knew what was going on and they were quite supportive, which was surprising in the sense that the anti-war movement had one of its major headquarters here at this university, and the Department of Anthropology almost led, with a few people in Political Science, led the opposition to the Vietnam War.

I think they were thrilled because of a number of things: one, I was their friend, is one thing. But the other thing was that this was an honor for the department and for the university. And it had nothing to do with their views on Vietnam, which was very gratifying to me and very interesting, because I would not have suspected their reaction. Anyway, they were contacted by the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), and they... they would always report to me saying, "Elliott, people are talking, asking nasty questions about you and we told them that you beat your wife and all that; you had difficult relations in Africa and so on. It was quite clear that they were excited. And finally, the FBI couldn't find out what I did one summer. I was working that summer ...I worked at Globe Mail, where we were addressing T.V. Guides, and they couldn't find out what I did that summer. So finally, (slight laugh) they came and said, "Professor, we couldn't find out what you did. Could you tell us what you did that summer?" I said, "Well, yeah." So they went and checked and they called me up and said, "Thank you very much. Our dossier is complete."

And the next thing I heard, again, another day I was in the office, and I think it was on another Saturday, and I got a call saying, “This is the White House. We just got the agr#ment from the Upper Volta for you as Ambassador. What are you? Are you a Democrat or are you a Republican? Not that it makes any difference, but we just want to know, because we want to put this on the air.” I said, “Well, no, I'm a Democrat.”

Then they ... about ten minutes later, I got a call from the Secretary of State saying, “Well, you know, Dr. Skinner, just wanted to make sure that you haven't changed your mind.” I said, “Nope.” “Okay,” he said, “don't say anything yet, but the White House will announce sometime in the next two or three hours that you will be our next Ambassador to Upper Volta.”

Well, that was that. The question then came as to what to do. And I didn't get down to Washington until around July and was ...I went through a month's briefing at the Foreign Service Institute, where I got a line on... again, I was very surprised by the nature of the power of the United States, the power of the Soviet Union, the responsibility of an ambassador and... Being involved with the power structure of the United States was awe-inspiring, because you tend not to understand what this country is all about until you begin to visit the military bases, see the hardware, counter-insurgency, the nature of the fight in Vietnam, and just the real power of the United States was frightening, all against the backdrop of difficulties fighting the Vietnamese.

Then I remember meeting Frank Williams, who had come back from Ghana right after the fall of Nkrumah. Frank then was under a cloud as the function of what people here felt about that episode. This is something that I have to discuss more fully in another context. I had never met Frank before, but I had remembered when I saw him that a long time before that he had called me when I was at NYU (New York University). He was then head...involved in the Peace Corps, and apparently he was trying to recruit blacks. And he'd called and he wanted to talk to me about possibly joining the Peace Corps. I don't think I was interested in that because after all, I was a professor. I had... I was a

scholar and I didn't feel that I wanted to get involved at the level of Peace Corps director or anything like that.

But I wanted Frank to send me a letter. He never did send the letter. (laughs) And I think he understood very well that the letter would be very important for my own career, but I don't think it would have been important for his. Anyway, he never did. But he was in town and Hugh Smythe was in town.

And one evening they took me at the home of Jim Moss, who is now professor at Adelphi. Jim at that point was working at the State Department. I had been in contact with Jim before that. He had called me up once about what it was like being a black professor — I think he was working on blacks who were professors or something like that — and I didn't respond. Something had happened. I didn't like his approach or something like that. I think he was at Union College then or some place like that. But I felt then — it must have been around 1959 or '60 — I felt that ... if you work hard you could be a professor, period. I didn't feel discrimination. I was still an Assistant Professor and I felt that I wasn't prepared then to start talking about our discrimination. I had been to school; I had a specific kind of experience. My feeling then was, if you worked hard you got ahead. And you know, discrimination, yes, existed, but I didn't feel that I was giving... I didn't think I was a victim of discrimination in the sense that I had no difficulties in doing my work. I thought that people at Columbia were crazy to have let me go down to NYU, but ... and I was sort of angry about that, but I felt that I didn't want to get involved in what was ... appeared to me then to be ... part of the tradition: saying that we can't make it.

Anyway, despite that, I don't even know if Jim remembered that. Hugh Smythe, of course, we were buddies from way back. I first met him at Ted Harris' house where he ... he got me involved with the black ... black bourgeoisie or elite, or whatever. I had never met those people. But Hugh sort of plugged me in to that. So I knew Hugh Smythe well and both Hugh, Jim and Frank Williams spent about two hours with me one evening giving

me advice as to what the issues were about being an ambassador. I may have that tape around somewhere, and if I do find that tape, that tape can become part of this record.

They were very helpful. I began to look at Frank now in a different way now, because I'd come out of a different environment with respect to the whole Ghanaian situation. But I remember that these three individuals were quite helpful. They said, well, this is what you've got to do, and they decided that they had to tape it, because they wanted me to listen to it.

And then the time finally came for the swearing-in and George Ball, a man I saw last night at a reception... no, yesterday at the reception for President Sadat of Egypt. Ball was the one to swear me in. I remember this patrician smiling benignly at this young professor. (laughs)

And the thing that I remember about that swearing-in is the. ..I was very much concerned about relations with Afro-Americans. I knew about all the problems of the Afro-American with the West Indian as stranger. I myself grew up in a home in the West Indies, in Trinidad, where as a born-Trinidadian I did not like, did not appreciate my mother's family which came from Barbados but had no ... no love for Trinidadians. So my feeling then was that they should go back to Barbados.

So I understood, basically, the feeling of Afro-Americans to West... toward West Indians. . This was structural and I understood it, and I thought that I should say something about that relationship within the context of my swearing-in. Of course, I made the proper noises about the role of blacks in America's foreign policy. I don't know where that speech is. The speech was recorded, but I ... I just made a few notes, and I remember Jim Moss was very helpful in helping me prepare that speech.

Anyway, I came back to New York and I was feted by Columbia; Columbia was quite pleased. Then I went off to Upper Volta. By that time, I began to get a different view of the

Foreign Service. Going through the bureaucracy was a trip. I noticed a number of things. I noticed the cold eyes of people in the Foreign Service. That struck me.

Q: Cold eyes?

SKINNER: Yes, very cold. The eyes were cold, not out of hostility to me, but they were cold with power. And that... I began to sense that with power comes a kind of formality... decisiveness and arrogance, which I think characterized many Foreign Service people. I don't think I felt that way, but I couldn't help noticing that.

Oh, apropos of this, I remember that (slight laugh)... I had come down to be looked at by the Inspector General of the Foreign Service. And on my way to see him, I stopped into an office which must have been the... the Office of Equal Opportunity. I saw a young man there who told me his name was Eddie Williams. He said, “Dr. Skinner, uhm, you've got to see the Inspector-General.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Your name is not on my list.” I said, “Well,” I said “”Oh?” He said, “No.” He said, “You are coming through the White House.” I said, “Well, is that right?” He said, “Well, I...” He started to fake. I said, “Look, I'll tell you what it's all about (laughs). I'm being considered as Ambassador.” He said, “Oh!” He said, “Well, I didn't know.”

Eddie Williams is now the president of the Joint Center for Political Studies Among Blacks. But that's the first time I met Eddie. Eddie was sort of concerned that my name had not come through his shop. I was being imposed upon the folks by the White House.

But the briefing in Washington was interesting in many other ways. Not only did you get some feel for the power of the United States, but I presented a problem for the briefers in the sense that they expect you to know nothing about anything, and every person has his or her hour with you. But I posed a problem for them. I was a specialist on Upper Volta, and many of them would have felt silly talking to me about the politics or what have you. The result is that everyone sort of held off. So in a way I was the worst briefed ambassador to have gone out there. I remember one day I went into a man's office and

spent about, oh, twenty minutes with the man and up to today I don't know why I went in there. But (laughter) I know that I spent twenty minutes just talking, you know, generalities, (laughs). So it was a very interesting situation.

Then the question came up as to how I should go to... to Upper Volta. Ambassador Palmer, who was Assistant Secretary of State, wanted me to go through the Ivory Coast. Now I knew enough about the Upper Volta to feel that the Voltaics would not have liked me to go through the Ivory Coast, because they were trying to get from under the Ivory Coast as their spokesman vis-a-vis the United States. So I told Palmer that I didn't want to go through the Ivory Coast.

Q: Why do you think they had an interest in your going that way?

SKINNER: Because I think they saw the Ivory Coast as more important than the Upper Volta. They saw the Ivory Coast as head of the what is called the Conseil de 1'Entente, the Council of Understanding, with Houphouet being very important. But I knew in terms of work on migration that the Mossi especially didn't like the fact that their people werebeing exploited in the Ivory Coast and they wanted to get from under Houphouet. I also knew that since Yam#ogo, had fallen from power and Yam#ogo was a friend of Houphouet, the new government might not have liked me to have gone through the Ivory Coast prior to coming to them.

So I decided that I wanted to go through Paris. But later on, for some reason, I changed my mind. I think I may have wanted to go through Dakar to hook up with Ambassador Cook — I think it must have been that — and then go on down. But at that point in time, Palmer, who was convinced by me that I shouldn't have gone through the Ivory Coast, vetoed.

So I went into Paris, made contact with people in Paris, then went down to Ouagadougou. I arrived there five o'clock in the morning and was met by the chief of protocol. The Americans were all there. I remember that I was surprised that the car was small; it was a

new Chrysler Newport. Of course, I expected a big car. I never had a car, but I thought, my God, you know. The car was brand new but small. I said, “Well, what kind of post is this?” Anyway, I arrived and set up shop.

Now one of my first visitors was Conombo. Now I went back, way back with Joseph Conombo. I was in the village where I worked in 1956 when Conombo came down to —politicking there and I introduced myself to him and he said, “Oh my God, are you American?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, you know “That's fantastic. Are you here in the village?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Oh, I see.” Well, later on when I went back to do my work in Ouagadougou, Conombo was Mayor of Ouagadougou. I think Conombo was always intrigued by me and he received me very well when I was working in Ouagadougou. And about two days before I left, he, had my wife and I over to the house for some champagne for farewell and he said, “You know, your country is very bright.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, you carne here as ... and worked in the rural areas; now you're working in Ouagadougou and they'll make you ambassador next time.” I said, “What?” I said, “But I'm not sure that I would want that.” He said, “Well, if they ask you to be ambassador, you accept it.” So when I got there (laughs)... I saw Conombo the first day. I had gotten in at five o'clock and I think I went to bed after going over to the Embassy (the flag was up for the first time in months), tested out the chair, and then I went home and went to bed. About five o'clock one of the servants said, “Dr. Conombo is here.” And I went down and he said, “Skinner (laughs) ... you Americans ...I told you (laughter)...” I said, “How should I know what would happen, but that's the way life is.” “You know, you Americans are formidable,” he said. Of course, he couldn't have known that.

In a very interesting way he was wrong and he was right, in the sense that societies are structured; they are not idiosyncratic. Yet there is no conspiracy. I'd gone out as a Ford Foundation Fellow; Jim Robinson may or may not have gotten money from the Ford. Jim at one point in time was with Congressman Vito Marcantonio in opposition to the status quo. That was to haunt Jim later on, because he was bitten by the African bug and felt that Crossroads was a way of linking up young Americans with Africa. He never did live down

his past with Vito Marcantonio, the American whatever, progressive part. But Jim was not part of any conspiracy.

Going back to do work in urban Africa, Jim Bohannen sent me because he had seen an article of mine in Africa; he thought that I had done rural work, that I knew the culture, that I should go back and do the urban study. I don't think Jim was part of any conspiracy, but these were all Americans. And for America at this point in time, the feeling was that Americans should know more about Africa and this was shared by both black and white Americans. So in a way there was a consensus in the society that something should be done about preparing blacks or preparing Americans to deal with an emerging Africa. So in a way then, American society as an entity, yes, had conspired to train a number of young Americans to relate to Africa, and I was in that group. But Conombo was wrong about his suspicion, his deep suspicion that we were ... that I had been recruited very, very early and that I was being carefully groomed by Washington to come and serve as ambassador. That wasn't the way it was at all. But again, as part of a larger pattern, he was actually correct.

Now the question came about presenting my letter, my letters of credentials to the President. This turned out to be a bit of a problem. I wasn't aware of many aspects of it. I got there, and I suspect normally, one presents one's credentials in a matter of days. I didn't present my credentials until about two weeks later. And Robert Owen, who was my DCM, a man who was here at Columbia, he got his Ph.D. here on his way to the Foreign Service, was very concerned about this and he thought it represented a slight. Then one day I went to...he was pushing me to push the Foreign Office to be able to present my letters, but I was in no hurry because I didn't, I didn't feel threatened—but Owen began to push. So I finally went to see Pierre Ilboudou. Now Pierre was Foreign Minister. I had know Pierre when he was Second Secretary of the Upper Volta Mission to the United Nations. I was at NYU; he lived at Washington Square Village. I used to go over at least once a week and have a great time, talk, talk. He would talk Mossi culture knowledgeably because he was working on his French degree in Paris, and at that point in time, I was

emerging as the, one of the Mossi specialists; and we talked. And later on Pierre got married to the sister of Fred Guirma, who was the Upper Volta Ambassador to the United Nations and a man I had met almost the first day I had gotten to Ouagadougou in '55. He was working in the local library of Institut Fran#aise d'Afrique Noire and when I told him I was an American he said, “Are you a pastor?” I said, “No.” He said, “You're not a pastor?” “No, I'm an anthropologist.” “Ah!” And myself and Fred we became very, very friendly. I knew his family and I became a great friend of his mother, who always used to give me an African millet beer when I was in Ouagadougou, just being an anthropologist.

So I knew Pierre. When I was studying the urban scene in Ouagadougou, Pierre had gotten married, and I was at his wedding. We're great buddies, but I saw Pierre then in his role as Foreign Minister. And he was very, very stern! He said, “We are sort of having to wait to present your letters because we are very concerned about the behavior of you Americans.” I said to myself, I'll be damned! (laughs) “What do you mean, you Americans?” I said, “I've just gotten here.” “Well,” he said, “the President is very concerned about the behavior of your predecessor.” Apparently Ambassador Estes made his visits of farewell throughout the country without notifying protocol that he was traveling. And Pierre said to me, “Of all the embassies in Ouagadougou, the American Embassy is the only embassy which does not respect us.” So I said, “Well, this is a new ambassador and we will see.” And he said to me, “Mr. Ambassador,” he was very, very formal, and he said, “The rule is that whenever the American Ambassador or Americans are leaving Ouagadougou, they should notify us three days in advance, because we would like to provide the appropriate welcome for them as they travel around the country.” I said, “Well, thank you very much, Mr. Foreign Minister,” and I asked to leave and he walked me to the door. And I think I got back to the Embassy pretty ticked off and Owen Roberts said that I should immediately write the State Department saying that if we are being restricted, we should tell Washington and subject the Voltaic personnel to the same strictures. I said, “Nope, let's overload their circuit.”

And before I forget, let me tell you what I meant by that. I meant that the Americans ... we are more efficient than they are, because we have more people, we tend to be more modern than they are, and my plan was to, in a very interesting way, overload their circuit. And I think what I had in mind then but didn't put into effect until about two or three months Later on, was to ... on Wednesday morning my plan was to send protocol letters, about five to ten letters, dealing with the weekend plans of members of the Embassy. And we were to go to various parts within two or three hours drive of Ouagadougou for picnics, or bird-watching, or to visit something. And they were, of course, to notify the local people that we were to arrive. Some people did go and some didn't, but for those who didn't go, we sent the proper regrets. Of course, babies had colic or dysentery, or the wife didn't feel very well, of course, you know. American women are very independent. If they don't feel like going, their husbands don't go. We did that for awhile. Then Pierre came from, from Kombissiri, a town about, oh, then about an hour and a half drive from Ouagadougou but now about only twenty minutes.

And one Saturday morning I was in my office, even though we didn't work on Saturdays, we didn't work on Saturdays but they did, and I received... somebody came with an invitation for that evening — a 'Red Cross dance. So I called him up and I said, “Well, look Pierre, I'm caught in a bind. I want to go to your village to... because you'll be there, I understand, and only the high patronage of the Foreign Minister, and you're my boss and I would like to go on down there to attend, but the invitation came this morning. So what, what do I... I can give you three-days' notice, but I would miss your ball tonight.” He said, “Oh, come on, I'll see you tonight.”

I joked about that, but the point was that from that day on we did not have to send messages. In other words, once we had respected their right, showed them the courtesy of not going around the country without letting them know, I think we were safe. Of course, whenever I planned extensive trips, I would always let them know.

But what I discovered later on was that Ambassador Estes was quite close to Yam#ogo. The trip he got together, and all that, to the United States. And when Yam#ogo fell... Estes apparently didn't like that and the new government was suspicious of what that meant in terms of U.S. policy. I found out later on that when they received the agr#ment request that I show up as Ambassador, they really thought that America was going to check them out carefully. Apparently they talked at length about what's, what's the meaning of this appointment. This man knows our belly, as they say. He lived in our belly, so America's very concerned now that we overthrow Yam#ogo so they are sending who, in their view, must have been a heavy, because he understood More, he understood the culture, so watch this guy. He is potentially a very dangerous guy, because America is taking special care to send not anybody; they're sending a specialist. So Pierre then... I suspect that the two weeks or so that elapsed between my arrival and presenting my letters were designed, I think, to make. ..to try to find whether or not I can maintain my cool, whether or not I would be arrogant in terms of demonstrating America's power. But I carefully, in a very interesting way, innocently showed good manners, what the rules are, how does one act before one has presented one's letters. There are certain things that one could do. One would go and pay some courtesy calls on one's fellow ambassadors. One could not show up at formal affairs representing the flag, with the flags flying and all that sort of thing. But one was free, relatively free to receive visitors and so on and so forth. But one had to play cool. And then, of course, the big day came and I presented my letters. The people from Abidjan came up with the plane. It was a very good letter, and that I went on and I started my task as Ambassador.

Q: You went then as an expert to begin with?

SKINNER: Right.

Q: Upper Volta wasn't new to you. You knew it very well. But you were seeing it through different eyes when...

SKINNER: that's right...

Q: ...you were there before. In addition to this awkwardness that was created by this delay in your being able to present your letter, can you think... I'm sure you were beginning to see Upper Volta in different eyes, or were you as the Ambassador?

SKINNER: Yes...

Q: Can you think of any other specific examples of ... of the difference in Upper Volta for you as the Ambassador to Upper Volta?

SKINNER: Well, it was quite clear — look. One of the differences, of course, was that the members of the staff could not... the Americans couldn't deal very effectively with a person who knew Upper Volta. They were all programmed to do certain things for the Ambassador and his wife, so that when Roberts would arrange for me to see certain persons and, of course, ignoring completely that I knew these people very well, and in many cases the Mossi are so hierarchical that they went along with a lot of this. Because you see, one of the things is that they have a concept called NAM, N-A-M, which means the NAM is that power which God... is a power that God gives to a man that makes him superior to every other man. What it really means is that today you are an ordinary individual. But once you get the NAM from the King, people will come and shake your hand, people will come in droves and shake your hand the day before you receive the NAM because the next day they can't do that; they can't touch you. Once you get the NAM you are transformed. So I had the NAM. I had a NAM from the United States. And this meant then that people did not expect me, the local people did not expect me to hobnob with them because I was in a different position. I was in a way different, and this is something we have lost in the Foreign Service now, because as I read the early letters sent with our ambassadors to Liberia, apparently the formula then was that one was sent to sit, to stay near to a government. That was the formula. You were sent to stay near to a government. That was your official designation. So the person would say, “I'm sending

you to sit near to, or stay near the Government of Liberia." So the Mossi had that. It was part of their tradition. So I was sent, and it's part of their tradition that you ask a woman about, you know, why do you get married or whatever, or if a woman is talking to you in the villages about her problems, she would say, "My father has asked me to sit here, and I'm sitting here with this man, this husband." In other words, she is sent by her father to sit there and that's her role. So that in a very interesting way the Mossi have no problems with my having the NAM now from, from (laughs) — I'm laughing because they would say to me, "Zeba n#r#," which means the place where you are sitting or standing is beautiful. That's the greeting for the chiefs. In a very interesting way, all sorts of jokes went between myself and the Mossi in terms of my having the NAM. So Conombo would come and say, "Naba," you know, or the American — I would show up — or the American chief has come, the American, the American Naba. And it was this kind of thing. So that was one aspect of it.

The second aspect had to do with invitations. Who was invited? And I played it. You invited me or you invited the American Ambassador. Well, we invite the American Ambassador. If you want to come, come. So (laughs) ... in other words, the American Ambassador was invited, and very often I would play on this. In a way it was fun but not fun in the sense that if, for example, if I were invited ... people would invite me. I would be invited to things that the other ambassadors would not be invited to — a baptism or a wedding — by persons who would not deem it proper to invite the Ambassador of France. So I would be invited. And I recognized that I was invited ... let's put it this way. When I was in Ouagadougou as a researcher, I would have been invited. I would have gone. I was in Ouagadougou now as the American Ambassador, and this was a dual invitation. I was invited in my status as a friend. But if the American Ambassador came, that was an honor to the child or the bride and groom, and so on. So I did a lot of that. It meant, also, very often it meant what kind of cars, what car I drove. I had a little Volkswagen and sometimes on a Sunday morning I would just get up and decide to go see Roger or go on by Conombo. And I'd get in the car and I'd drive myself. Other times I would be driven and

the flags would be flying and that. Sometimes I would stop. I used to blow their minds; I would stop the car. I would meet — there was a woman called Josephine. She was a very interesting friend, because she was a social worker, and I was working with her to kind of understand juvenile delinquency. And I, of course, when I became Ambassador, a person like Josephine would never even... I don't even know what she would have to do to come and see me. I guess she would have had to go through the ministry and all that sort of thing. I hadn't seen her. One day I was ... one day I was just being driven and I saw her on her bicycle, and I stopped the car. Well, she didn't get down on her knees, which is typical, but apparently that made the rounds. You know, there was a big man, you know, and he didn't forget, you know. He stopped, and you know and ... and, of course, she told her husband and, you know, he told everybody, “You know he's all right.” But that's ... that's the difference.

Q: That must have endeared you to a lot of people?

SKINNER: Yeah ... well, you know, I hope so.

Q: Did it ever hurt you, do you think?

SKINNER: Uhm, Uhm...

Q: Were there any ... because of this dual role it'd be in a sense, you think...

SKINNER: There was one place I didn't go, and did I feel a little embarrassed by that? And if I had to do it again, I would have. I would have ... people would come and I would see them. I mean I saw everybody who came to the Embassy. Of course, sometimes my staff was shocked. The people from the rural areas would come with their hoes on their shoulders. They wanted to see the American chief or something like that, and I would say, come on in. And Nancy, who was my secretary, her eyes would get big. But then as you'd come in and they would be sitting on their... they would be kneeling and sitting down on the ground and this-and I'd be talking to them.

But there was one woman, she owned what is called a cabaret, a millet bar, and I used to go there because I was interested in the economics of millet beer preparation. People used to get drunk and people used to warn me even as an anthropologist that it wasn't very good to go there, because when Mossi get drunk, sometimes they get out of line and they would approach a big person such as I was — you know, with a Ph.D. and all that — and they would lose their heads. And they were very, very careful of that. And I don't think that I would have... it would have been infra dig for me to have gone there, and that woman had no way of coming to see me. She wouldn't have come; she was a woman of about fifty-five, sixty. But you see... I should have invited her to ...I couldn't have invited her, I don't think, to any of the affairs, because she couldn't mix up ...she couldn't be mixed up with the Government.

But I should have invited her to visit me, because my old friend Elisa did, an old Muslim Koranic teacher who died, incidentally, and I went to his funeral. I went to his funeral; I went there and met ministers there and I went there and, you know, I even was part of the cortege to where he was buried. So he used to come on his donkey, very funny... (laughs)... used to cone on his donkey and this woman she would have — I don't remember her name now — she could have come because one day I remember seeing her all dressed up when I was doing field work — and I said, “Where are you going?” And she said, “I'm going to my father's house.” So I knew that there's a pattern that she could, if I had sent a message saying that, come and visit the house, she would have done that; she would come dressed up and all that. And, of course, the Mossi or the Voltaic ministers didn't have to be around. So these are the things.

But by and large, no, I had no problems (laughs) ... no problems at all in the sense that I was very ...uh, I exploited the ambassadorship to find out more. For example, anything that happened in town, anything, a bicycle race or a Red Cross ball or boxing, or whatever, in a small community the ambassadors would be invited as a matter of course. Well, I would show up. And very often I was the only ambassador there or sometimes the

Ghanaian Ambassador, who was an African, or Mali, but by and large the French, Israelis or the Germans, they wouldn't come. But I would go because I was interested; I was interested in the people. I was also interested in getting another view of Ouagadougou from an official standpoint. The other thing, of course, is that something I had discovered earlier is that there were questions I could not ask when I was in the village, Nob#r#. But when I met people from Nob#r# in Ouagadougou, when I was doing my field work in Ouagadougou, I would say, “Look, remember so and so happened and I didn't find out what happened? What was it all about?” They'd say, “Oh, yeah!” Then sometimes they would smile because they knew that they wouldn't tell me when I was in the village.

So I also discovered that from the perspective of the ambassadorship, I could ask questions about Ouagadougou that I could not have asked before.

Q: Very interesting.

SKINNER: And later on, when I left, after I left Upper Volta to come back here, (I never visited the President's house informally when as Ambassador, because he, again, he was not Mossi; he was a Samogho. And, of course, his Minister to Washington is also Gurunsi) — about three or four years ago — I was visiting Ouagadougou and the President said, come over to the house. And there were two of us. And we were talking ethnology. And it was interesting because we were talking as ... there was no question of my being the anthropologist; they knew that. And one of the things I find difficult with many white anthropologists is that they can't have...they can't have normal conversations with Africans, in the sense that if you have a Frenchman talking to a German and Italian, they will talk to each other about their different customs, exchanging ideas. White anthropologists don't work that way with Africans. There's no freedom, there's no free exchange. In other words, the whites tend to ask questions. They're doing all the work.

Whereas that night we were talking about the Samoghos; we were talking about the Gurunsi, I was providing information on Mossi and also America. We were talking as friends about many things. You know, of course, they still called me Mr. Ambassador, Ambassador, you know, you understand that, but that's not what you do in this guy's house. And I would laugh, because the Mossi, Mossi, Mossi and you know, those other people...

But it's interesting the kind of information you can get, you didn't get it as a function of being the anthropologist. You got it as a function of being a friend who is interested.

The other thing I did, of course, I would always go to the meetings of the Voltaic section of the Society of African Culture. There's a Voltaic section. I would always go to their meetings and that taught me something else, which was that they wanted to hear about my experience in Nob#r# and Manga. That's all. They were Mossi; they're Mossi from Koudougou, Mossi from Yatenga, Mossi from Boulsa. They would never conceive that I was a specialist on all the Mossi. They said, “Yes, you lived there, right. Now what do they do there?” And I would say, “Oh, is that right?” “Yeah, but those people down there are backward.” Then I'd say, “What do you mean by backward? Come on!” you know. But it was that kind of ... I was an ambassador, also a specialist, but not on the Mossi. “Yeah, you know, those people down there where you, where, the people down there, yeah, you even talk like them.” That's the kind of thing that you get. That was good I thought, that they accepted my expertise and I sort of discovered something which was in a way very humbling, but I think it's correct, in a sense that they accepted my books on Mossi as almost the last word, but only dealing with outsiders. In other words, I learned, I mean I discovered then, I think, that if they wanted to tell somebody about Tiossi, they'd say, “Well, you know what Dr. Skinner says. Read The Mossi of Upper Volta. But I suspect, and I didn't know that, but I discovered that in reading my books, they would say, “Yeah, this is the Mossi of Nob#r#. What he's written is true but only for that area.” But they would never tell this to me to my face nor will they tell an outsider about that.

Q: Do you think it's because they feel nobody really knows?

SKINNER: I don't know. I think that they felt that- I think it's a question of levels, that for the generality... in other words, it's like, you know, if a person speaks English for example, if you met a person who speaks English in contrast to a person who speaks French, we are so eager to talk to the person we're not going to say, “Well, you're from where?” In other words, if we went, if we went to, oh, shall we say Venezuela or something like that and we saw an English-speaking person, we would not be very specific in the ... well, you know, you don't say 'to-may-to'; you say 'to-ma-to'.

In other words, those little differences become insignificant in terms of the larger problem in terms of communication. So I think this is how they saw my work. My work gave the larger picture. But when it came down to specifics, they would say, “Well, yes, but you know we really say to-ma-to, not to-may-to.” So that's the difference between how they saw my work. And I think it was very good, because it... it also gave me another view of how anthropologists should not do things, that a lot of the fighting that takes place among anthropologists is due to having studied different regions within the same area. And there are local differences. And they fight, stupidly, as though one is right and one is wrong. In other words, we tend to ... and it comes from an old tradition, where one man would go and nobody else would go back and that's almost carved in stone through all time. The world is not that way, and I learned that from that experience.

Q: 1 would like to ask you to talk a little about U.S. presence...

SKINNER: Okay...

Q: ... in Upper Volta.

SKINNER: The United States ... the problem... I got there at a point when the United States had made its big thrust, because we had made our big thrust in '60. Here were these countries becoming independent and we wanted to win them over from the

Russians. We were against the Russians and we did a number of things. For example, we gave them weapons, we gave them trucks, and so on and so forth. We even gave them a certain kind of protection against the Soviet entrance. For example, one of the things that I had in my control was telecommunications equipment which would permit the President to be in contact with the capital and his ministers all the time. The stuff had just come into the Embassy about, oh, about two months after the President fell, and one of the things that I was told was that I could pass this ... to check this situation out and if I wanted to give this equipment to the new President, I could.

So we were trying to, from 1960 on, we were trying to get ourselves there. Now in terms of the presence we had ...I had a. staff of about ten officers, including a Peace Corps, USAID, Peace Corps, U.S. AID, that is, of course, members of the Embassy. I had no military attach#. My CIA man was this guy Stockwell, who wrote the book criticizing Kissinger for his attempts to take over Angola. He's a bad boy, but I found him, as a CIA, he would... I found him ... well, let's put it this way. I was reading Le Carre's books on spies and all that, and one of the points that Le Carre made was that the CIA believes that it has the... it has seen so much evil that it trusts nobody. Nobody is to be trusted, even the President of the United States, and that the CIA's task is to protect the nation from itself. So I always assume that the CIA had a view of American society that the CIA felt was superior to everybody's view.

Eisenhower had written a letter saying that the Ambassador controls. Apparently that didn't work. When Kennedy was President, he also sent a letter saying that the Ambassador had control. But it's ... coming from my perspective, being a CIA agent was an. occupational hazard. It's like as a student ... we talked about bureaucratic personalities, a person who governed his job — I should say Liberian personality, too — but, anyway, the people who are so built into their job that it takes over the entire personality, so that the railroad man at his house, he still goes by the clock, and all sorts of crazy things. And I always assumed that the CIA people were ... their relations were structural and it had nothing to do with personalities. It meant that it was their task to protect the United States. So

that I did not trust Stockwell to tell me, to be truthful with me, because I thought that if it became necessary, it was almost his duty to protect the American interest even against the American Ambassador.

I will say this, and I will re-emphasize this: I never once found him crooked, never once. He always asked permission to come up to Ouagadougou, always touched base with me when he got there, always reported to me when he left, and I had confidence in him.

Now, I think there's something else to be said about that. I had the right to have or not to have CIA visit Ouagadougou. My colleague, a white man, who was in Niger, didn't want any CIA people, and apparently didn't have them. Now I don't know too much about this, but I remember that when I got there, as I said, I did not go on down to, I did not come through the Ivory Coast. Our station chief, the station chief, for that whole area was stationed in the Ivory Coast and Stockwell was working for the station chief. And I remember saying to somebody that, no, I don't want anybody to come up until I could check with the Station Chief.

So I remember going down to the Ivory Coast and being introduced to the Station Chief and that man gave me the once over. I remember vividly he had deliberately come to check me out because I had said, no, I wanted nobody to come up until I had come down to the Ivory Coast. So I ordered the plane to take me down to the Ivory Coast on an official visit, and then he asked me when Stockwell should come up. And I said, fine, Stockwell should come up. So we had that.

Now, in terms of the other presence, we had missionaries, an Assemblies of God Mission. I had had a falling out with them, because in one of my articles I said they were not doing very well. They were not making very many Christians. They were upset. I understand from one of my servants who was recruited by them as a Christian, that they felt I did not like the missionaries, but I am... they were Americans. They represented an American presence, and I remember telling them that I shall be visiting their church, and I formally

visited their church. And then after they had ...they had... I had given them a month's notice or something like that, and they pulled people from all over.

And this is what I mean by “cold eye.” It was quite clear that I was the United States Ambassador and that ... that was that. This is what I mean by the kind of arrogance that you get. In other words, I didn't care what they thought. I was the United States Ambassador and it was my duty, if they were to be evacuated, it was my duty to protect them. I don't know what would have happened if... if they were disrespectful to me. But they, but again its, its, its, its, fascinating. Because the American Ambassador was coming, they brought their people, they brought their people out. They were racists; I know they were racists. And talking about this, I knew there were people in the Embassy who were racists. They would break the glasses used when they served Africans. I knew that because my people reported it; my servants did. But I knew that I had to dance with them when we had things at the Embassy, and I did. And that was my role.

There was one party I went to and, again, talking about American presence, there were people from the ... the Near East Foundation had a project, and I'll talk to you a little bit more about that, and the people there had a party. And in a small post, people who work on projects funded by USAID, they become part of the American community. And, of course, protocol calls for a certain kind of behavior in the sense that, and I'll talk to you more about this, in the sense that you are always an ambassador in dealing with Americans. So that if you are invited to a party, and even though you're having a great time, your DCM would come and say, “Well, Mr. Ambassador, some of the ladies are getting tired, which means then, look Buster, these people, if you want to be a bastard, you can be a bastard and they will fall ... fall out, you know, fall out. But if you're considerate, leave. And as soon as you leave, everybody leaves. No one can leave before you leave. And that used to be a trick that you could come back. You could take off and as your car leaves, you could see people just running for their cars to leave. But in many cases I had to leave a good party because, of course, people were tired. And you know, very often

they didn't care. They were not having a good time, but the Ambassador's there and, you know, they've got to be there.

There was one party I went to and the woman expected me to... I got there and nobody was there to meet me. But you don't do that. When you invite the Ambassador, you keep your eyes peeled for when his car gets there. And this woman — again I'm blaming the poor woman, I guess she was the hostess, but not only wasn't she there to greet me, but she expected me to stand in line with my plate. And, of course, my DCM, he immediately saw this and, boy, he really hustled her into line!

See, you get that kind of thing. In terms of the American presence again. We had Catholic Relief Services and they were distributing what is called PL 480. This was grain, surplus food, that we would give to people who did not have enough to eat. And the Catholics, the Catholic Relief Services they couldn't apparently find a French-speaking American to run it, so they had a little French Canadian. And although America was giving the food through the Catholic Relief Services, he was pushing Canada and the Catholics at the expense of America, and I didn't like that. This is our food; it is given by USAID. We're going to give it to you... distribute it because we know that you need it for your contact with ... with the... the Cardinal and all that sort of thing, but don't fool around. Don't act as though this food is not coming from the Embassy. And at that point in time, I represented the United States. And that's what I'm talking about: this kind of arrogance. I represented the President of the United States. And I wasn't going to have these little Catholics coming around here saying that they're doing, what? The American Ambassador has to be there because I represented all of the Americans and you guys are representing this, okay? (laughs)

The other thing that happened, it was Peace Corps and there are a lot of myths involved in this and one wonders, sometimes — wonder about the anthropologists. Congress says that the local people must invite Peace Corps. Those are the rules. Well, the fact of the matter is that the local people very often don't care about Peace Corps. They don't need them or if they need them, it costs too much money for them. So what happens is that the

Ambassador has to elicit from the local Minister an invitation for Peace Corps. And Peace Corps Washington would bug you to make sure that the local people then invite Peace Corps to come in. So you had to work your butt off trying to get an invitation for the Peace Corps.

But once Peace Corps comes in — apparently in Washington they don't tell the Peace Corps directors that Peace Corps begs to come in — the director comes in and he says, “Well, they have invited us here and according to the ... the convention signed, they've got to produce ... they've got to provide housing for our volunteers, you got to do that, you got to do this. And, my problem is now, what do I tell this idiot? Do I say to him, look, come off it? Nobody, and, again, see this whole question and the black thing comes in, and I don't know how white ambassadors handle this, because what this white man Peace Corps director is saying very often is, “Look, these people are incompetent. They have said so. They have invited us and they're not doing anything.” And my first reaction: “Come on man, you know. No one wants you here in the first place, you know.” (slight laughter) And I'm not going to say, “No one wants you there.” I don't know who is talking. If the Ambassador at this point in time is joining rank with the local people, he could say, “Look, whitey, stay away. Who wants all your nonsense?”

Anyway, it's my task to get Peace Corps there, all right so Peace Corps can do certain things, teach English, or help and so on. But Peace Corps, getting Peace Corps is part of our policy. Peace Corps volunteers should go to help as part-Peace Corps representing, in a very interesting way, a foreign policy arm of the United States.

Q: That was one of the questions I wanted to ask you, also, about U.S. policy.

SKINNER: Part of the policy is to get Peace Corps there. On one hand... the other thing, of course, Peace Corps is designed to respond to needs. So then you have this question, okay? And very often the people didn't have the resources to provide houses for volunteers, because who are these volunteers? By and large, okay, they teach English.

Well, yes, but you need English not in schools in the bush; you need English in schools in the city. But the ethos of Peace Corps then becomes a drag on the resources. Now, very often I had to use my own resources, the Ambassador's fund, fifty thousand dollars, to provide the possibility, without letting the Peace Corps director know that it's my money that's making it possible for a local village to invite his volunteers. Okay? One problem.

The other question has to do with intelligence. A Peace Corps volunteer in a village; very often you get there and these kids are at the mercy of the local people, actually at their mercy. They're there absolutely isolated, and those are functional communities. A stranger comes in without a lot of resources even with the resources, they will subject you to their rules. And I would get into a village and I would know this kid has got to be pulled out. As I traveled around I would get there and I would sense, sometimes women, are exploited worse than that, I sensed that these kids are under the control of the local chief or politician. And I would yank them out, because if you're talking to them and they begin to look over their shoulders, “hey, out.”

The other thing, of course, is intelligence. You'd go there and very often I would go just to show the flag, to tell the local people this kid is not here alone. This kid has the power of the United States in back of him or her. Okay? And these kids, you just go there and just say, “Hi. How are you doing?” and they will just tell you everything. So when you leave there you know everything that's going on in that village, in the whole little district. So in a very interesting way, when these kids are later on accused of being CIA agents, it isn't that they're CIA agents. It is that they are human beings who are lonely, would like to talk to a high status person such as an ambassador, and they would spill their guts. So any officer who makes the rounds to visit cones back to the capital filled with. information.

Now, in terms of protocol, the Peace Corps director... You see, Washington tells Peace Corps, make direct contact with the local people, because it's person to person, face to face, without understanding that you don't do that. That while Washington has one view of the world, the African reality is another view of the world. So one day I got the ... One

day ... One Saturday, again — it always happens on Saturday — I got to the office and the Foreign Minister was on the phone. “Mr. Ambassador, uhm, uhm, I can't, well, I'm calling to tell you that, uhm...” “What?” “I'll be late, uhm, to the reception tonight.” I said, “Okay.” I said, “What reception?” He said, “Oh, Peace Corps vol... You know the reception that Peace Corps directors are holding.” I said... I said, “Oh, that.” I said, “Mr. Minister, if you're going to be late, I think the best thing to do is to ... I think I'll cancel that.” He said, “No, you don't have to, but I'll be late. But you know, family and all that.” I said, “Look, Mr. Minister, I think ... I think it's important enough, your visit, to postpone this until you are free.” I called that Peace Corps volunteer ... director, and I chewed him out. I said, “How dare you!” I said, “Do you know what would have happened?”

Q: He called the... He scheduled the affair?

SKINNER: Without letting me know. I said, “Do you know what would have happened if that minister would have gotten there and I was not there and you would have been there? Look, do you know what would have happened? They would have said, yes, these arrogant Americans. This Ambassador is so big and mighty that he would subject me, the Foreign Minister, to his minions. The next time you do something like this, I'm. going to send you home.” I cancelled it. I said, “You could ... you know ... if you could ... You guys, you can have something, but every official Voltaic has to be contacted. It's inconvenient for the Foreign Minister and for the Ambassador.” Now that's the kind of things that in terms of U.S. policy...

Now in terms of ... the big thing, of course, what the Voltaics wanted from us was AID. And we were not doing very well with that. They wanted more, and we were prepared to give. We had a three-million-dollar ranch, a place called Makoy. The Near East Foundation was running that. That started when I was doing field work in Ouagadougou, and I thought it was funny. Didn't know I was going to inherit the damn thing later on, so the last laugh was on me. The Minister of Livestock and Rural Development would usually say, “Mr. Ambassador, when are we going, when are we going to go up to the ranch?” Or, “How is

the ranch coming?" And the point was it was turning into a joke, and the joke was on me. The problem, of course, was the ... Well, first of all, the Near East Foundation didn't know what it was doing, and apropos of that, in the Washington Post of three days ago, four days ago, there was a big ... there was a picture of the head of AID returning a check of twenty million dollars to Reagan. And this check had ... represented money from projects which did not, were not working and which were cancelled. Among the places mentioned as a site for cancelled projects was Upper Volta. I'm furious with that. But the point was that many of the Americans who did work had no notion of local conditions. More than that, they, for example the Makoy Ranch ... we had two individuals who were supposed to be setting up the ranch. Now the ranch was about, oh ... a day's drive, or a day and a half's drive from Ouagadougou. And they would visit the ranch site.

Q: What kind of ranch was it?

SKINNER: Just a cattle ranch.

Q: Oh!

SKINNER: They would visit the site. I said, "Look, whenever I see you guys you're in Ouagadougou. When do you go up there?" "Well, Mr. Ambassador, we go up there ..." I said, Look, according to your contract, you're supposed to spend eighteen days a month. I don't care how you spend that eighteen days. You can go up there and stay eighteen days, come back and spend twelve days in Ouagadougou, or you can go and come. But I want eighteen days." Boy! Their wives got upset, talked to my wife that I was trying to break up their homes. Well, I'll be damned! Two million dollars and you guys are living in Ouagadougou with your... You're becoming... You've become so part of the Embassy staff that you're always around and you're giving barbecues and your children are involved in dancing and ballet and all that and nobody is doing anything up there.

Well, finally the question came up as to the African counterpart. At a certain point in time, we were supposed to turn over to the Africans.

Q: What was the main purpose of that ranch?

SKINNER: To produce cattle.

Q: For the country?

SKINNER: Right. Now — and I'll talk to you about another aspect about that. The point was that the Americans ... we were supposed to put in the infrastructure, get the cattle started and so on and so forth, and then, meanwhile, we were training ... an African was being trained in Paris to come down and take over.

Now, eventually there was a very interesting conjuncture here. The Americans, the Near East Foundation people, were not interested enough to put up the infrastructure because they were not living up there. Okay? And until they got the facilities up there, the African who was coming from Paris with his French wife would not even think of going close to that thing, so that the delay on the part of the Americans coincided very well with the problem of the African who didn't want, after coming back from France, to live in the bush. So I decided to push it. I went to the Minister and said, “Look, where is this man from Paris?” “Oh, well, he's coming back in two months and he is trying to stay in Ouagadougou.” I said, “Well, according to the protocol, we've got to turn over one year before the end of the project. So it's getting to the point where I think I want to do that. Plus, look, I was up there about two weeks ago and there were Americans up there, and I don't want to deal with Americans anymore. You were supposed to have had somebody up there anyway from the Ministry of Livestock. So the next time we go up there, I think I want to deal with Voltaics.” He said, “Are you serious?” I said, “Yeah.” Then he said, “Do you know you're the first ambassador to have said that?”

In other words, this is interesting because neither the French, the Israeli or the German — none of those ambassadors felt that they wanted to talk to the local people. In other words, their view of their work was that their people would be in charge. And when they went to the site, they talked to their people. They did not talk to the Africans! So he said, “You're the first ambassador to-to say that.” I said, “Well, I'm sorry about that, but I don't want to talk to Americans, because in a year we'll have to turn this darn thing over to you. And the Americans didn't like that, because I said, “Look, I don't want to talk to you. I don't want to talk to you!”

Now, I think they may have felt that it was racist. There may have been some racism, you know. But the point is that I felt that one of the problems in these projects' failing is that, until the very last day, the Americans are there, and when they sign off the Africans don't know what the hell's going on. So I insisted, and, of course, we got a plane and we went up there and the Africans were around, and the Americans were sulking.

That ranch project failed, and towards the end it was quite clear that the Minister was beginning to transform it from a ranch which produced cattle to a prophylactic station where cattle would come there and would be treated and so on. In other words, the three million dollars ... What I was able to do, I did get three important buildings; I did get wells and windmills and some local electricity for our three million dollars. But my feeling was that the Near East Foundation should not have gotten any of our money, and that the next project should have been insured by Lloyds of London to make sure that it worked.

Now, the other thing in terms of policy. The Upper Volta's resources, you have ten million tons of high grade manganese. That's their major resource of a mineral nature. And the question then was who was to exploit that? Now, the French had known about it for a long time. But the French have manganese in Gabon and the Voltaics were ... were quite sure that the French were waiting to complete the exploitation of the manganese in Gabon, holding the manganese in Upper Volta in reserve.

They asked me ... asked Ambassador Estes, before I got there, to see what could be done. When I got there they asked me to get in touch with Union Carbide. Now this was a trip, because here was Union Carbide violating the UN and supporting the Ian Smith government in Rhodesia, because of chrome. I, of course, was against Union Carbide, being a black person, I think. I know I'm black, but I think one of the reasons for being against Union Carbide is because I'm a black person not wanting to see an American company supporting Ian Smith. But here are the Voltaics asking me to make contact with Union Carbide (laughs) ... I said, “My God! Okay. Well, you know that Union Carbide is supporting Ian Smith.” They said, “Yeah, we know that, but this is our only resource and, in any case, if he becomes powerful tomorrow, we'll take care of Ian Smith.”

So I found myself down here in New York City on the 55th floor of the Union Carbide building talking to these people about trying to get ... get them interested in taking out their ten million tons. I felt kind of silly. I felt that ... I felt out of place. That's the thing. The incongruity of it all. And, of course, the Irish maid who was serving she saw me and her eyes almost popped out. And I smiled to myself. I said, “Well, lady (laughs), if you're surprised to see me here, I'm surprised to see me here!” (laughs)

Union Carbide decided it didn't ... it couldn't get a good deal from that, plus the World Bank felt that it was uneconomical for the Voltaics to exploit that, because it would have meant that a railroad had to be sent from Ouagadougou to Tambao and that would have cost the equivalent of the manganese. So they would have had then a railroad, a big hole in the ground and nothing to show. And, as a matter of fact, they're still talking about it, but nothing has been done.

But the question, the big question, had to do with, in terms of U.S. policy, had to do with our overall policy which is global in scope and the reality of Upper Volta. And this country finds it difficult to have scaled down its policies to meet the reality of small societies. And

I think this is the real problem we have. It's theoretical; it's also practical. Sometimes I say it's like Muhammad Ali trying to shake hands with his gloves on with a baby. Impossible!

The Voltaics were waying to me, “Look, we have all this meat here” — and it's true they have a lot of cattle — “and the cattle is walked down to the Ivory Coast.” And they said, “Why can't you come and ... you know, we know that you don't need the cattle for, for food, but the cattle we have can be used to make corn beef.” Uhm, okay. We arranged to have Arthur D. Little come and make a feasibility study. They came ... the men came and said, “How many head of cattle do you kill everyday in Ouagadougou?” I said, “Oh, about, I think about fifty.” “That's all?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Well, thank you very much.” That's that.

In other words, the scale, the scale is so different that there's no way to articulate the business activities of the United States and the reality of Upper Volta. So, in a way then ... for example, you would get an order saying ... if it's not deemed counterproductive, will you tell the Voltaics that the United States would like so and so and so and so?

The big thing of all in that period was the two-China policy. We were friendly with Taiwan and the Voltaics were also friendly with Taiwan. We were trying to prevent them from changing their minds to start recognizing Red China. This is before Nixon and Kissinger went to Red China. The same thing was true of Korea. We recognized South Korea; they recognized South Korea. We didn't want them to break relations with South Korea to recognize North Korea. So the question then is how do we get them to do what we want them to do? They are not involved in the Chinese thing, you know, and nor are they concerned about the Korean thing. You know, those people are far.

Now, one day I paid a visit to the King. We were talking — of interest, I took him his champagne. You know, the chiefs are not God. You don't go to them empty-handed. So the American Ambassador took his bottle of champagne and a bottle of whiskey: champagne for him and whiskey for his guests. And, of course, it's all done, it's all done

within both of our vision but at the side. So we are all aware that — I didn't touch the stuff, nor did he touch it — but we know what was going on and, you know, I knew about it.

So he said, “You know, you Americans are strange.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, do you grow rice in your country?” I said, “Yeah, in the South. Oh yes, we have rice all over the place.” He said, “Well, why don't you then send Americans to grow rice here? Why do you use the Chinese?” I said, “Well, perhaps because the Chinese are ... we're using the Chinese?” He said, “Yeah. Yeah, the Chinese came here when your predecessor was here and, yeah, we know that you're giving money to the Chinese.” I said, “Well...” I don't remember what I said.

When I got back to the Embassy and reported to the Department this conversation... Well, the point ... this was part of my ... the briefing breakdown. I wasn't briefed on that. But I got a letter from Clinton Knox. Clinton Knox was our ambassador, a black ambassador to — he died last year and people didn't tape him before he died. But Clinton wrote me a letter saying, “Elliott, have you never heard of Project Vanguard?” I said, “No.” (Because, you see, when we send a letter, when we send a telegram to Washington, we copy to the surrounding posts and very often ... we have what is called back channels. This guy, Ambassador (cannot remember his name) was fired by Haig because he was going behind Haig's back to talk about our policy in the Middle East. And very often if you read the telegram ... If Clinton Knox is saying something about what's going in Dahomey, and I knew what was going on, I would not send a telegram because very often it would have to be copied.) So I wrote him a letter. So he said, “Well, look. We have been using the Taiwanese.” Project Vanguard was the device where we would give money to Taiwanese or we'd give the Taiwanese arms, or whatever. And in return for that they would send their people to Upper Volta to try to help the Voltaics, with rice, and that was supposed to demonstrate to the Voltaics that the Taiwanese were the ones who were helping them. And therefore, by doing that, we will say to the Voltaics: “Look, but Taiwan is helping you, so why then ... so we can depend upon you for the vote, can't we?” “Of course.” Now the Africans knew about that, and unless you're well briefed you can make an idiot of yourself,

because very often these things slip by. Now, Washington came right back and said, “Well, yes, it's true. It's true, we thought you knew about this.” Anyway, Washington didn't hide this from me, but Ambassador Clinton Knox told me about it.

So that our policy then was to try to fool the Africans, to have the Africans believe that the Chinese in Taiwan were helping them and not the United States. So when, before the meeting of the General Assembly around this time, August, you get a telegram saying, “Well, the time has come again, go on in and say, well, you know the United States would appreciate it very much if you can maintain your position, because the Red Chinese have still demonstrated that,” bla, bla, bla, bla, bla and bla, bla, bla.

Now, that was okay. What was so funny was that the Taiwanese Ambassador was chauvinistic as hell, and that blew my mind. He really considered Americans barbarians, and that got me angry! But his meals were good. Oh, my God, the meals were good! But you know that guy ... I said to myself, well, he may be Taiwanese, but he was a Taiwanese from the mainland, which was interesting. He was a Taiwanese, ... he was Chinese from the mainland. He had gone there with Chang. So he still retained that Chinese arrogance. But I thought to myself, “Well, my friend,” I would say to myself, “one of these days the Red Chinese are going to take you guys.” But arrogant and nasty and in a very interesting way anti-American, which was interesting to me that this happened.

The people that I had to lean on a little and got nowhere with were the South Koreans. They were giving nothing, nothing I tell you, nothing. And if Upper Volta needed anything, they needed something, something. Come on, reciprocity is the spice of life. Give something. Nothing! You can't even give an ambulance? No. Not even ... at one point in time I was trying to get the South Koreans to give them a little mill. Upper Volta produces cotton, but most of the cotton used in the hospitals came from France. You know I was trying to produce sterile cotton. I was trying to get that done. I got nowhere with that. So these are some of the problems we had in terms of the American presence and so on.

Well, again, the big thing, of course, was Vietnam. There were two things on Vietnam: one was the President of Upper Volta Lamizana was a colonel in the French army that was defeated in Indo-China. So he'd been there; he knew about Vietnam. So every once in a while you would get a telegram saying, “Well, tell the local people that we had a big victory,” bla, bla, bla. And, of course, he was fascinated with the Vietnamese War, because he was convinced that we couldn't beat those people. Absolutely convinced. And I remember the Tet offensive, which was a disaster for us. Some telegram came from Washington saying that, “Tell those people over there that ... contrary to what France is saying in Le Monde, that America was not defeated.” Well, I went into the President and he said, “When are you going to fire Westmoreland?” I said, “Well, what...” I said, “No, we did fairly well.” Of course, I...I used to talk to him all the time about this war. All the time. All the time. And things began to fall into place for me when I got a visit from General Goodpaster

The nature of the problem became significant to me when Goodpaster came in with one of those C-5s, I think, Star Lifter, and the President wanted to see it. So we made a formal visit to a fantastic plane. And one of the officers said, “Just before we came out here, we came from Vietnam and this plane was filled with bodies.” And that these Star Lifters are huge, monstrous. It's the biggest plane we have. And the President said, “What?” And that began to put things in sort of perspective.

Now at this point the President had had taken over. There was not a coup. President Yam#ogo had goofed for many reasons and he was forced to resign. The President took over. And the President always felt that I had a mandate to have the Government revert back to civilian rule. And it is true that during my confirmation hearings before the Senate, that became an issue. The Senators were very concerned that their friends, as the Voltaics told me afterwards, were not running the country. They saw all politicians as alike.

Q: Yeah, you're talking now about the general political climate of ...

SKINNER: Yes. The President was trying his best, but the problem was that the administrative infrastructure was too heavy for the Government. In other words, that, country could not afford its overhead; it just couldn't. And the reason for that was that during the colonial period — the French, of course, were exploiting the Voltaics — but they didn't have many persons there. They had, what, one officer for every sixty thousand people. That's very little in terms of administrative overhead. And these persons had a metropolitan status in that they had, they had all the perks that went with being in a very underdeveloped country and so on. And the French were exploiting and the peasants were being, you know, exploited, but the Government didn't cost very much.

Now, once the Africans began to clamor for independence, those who were clamoring for independence represented the African educated class. And the French tried to buy them off by giving them the same perks as the French were giving their own people. So the cost of administration became more and more, and the French began to put in their own money for the first time in the colonial history. Starting from 1951 the French began to pump money into these areas. Before that, they were taking the money out. As these countries became independent, the French gave them some money and we came in and gave them some money, the Europeans came in and gave them some money, but by-and-large the money that we gave, and the Europeans, was not enough to provide the basis for an economic takeoff. So, as the French began to build an infrastructure, more schools, more hospitals, better roads and everything, and all the accoutrements for a modern state, and as the African politicians began to say that this is what they wanted independence for, when they came in, they began to spend the resources.

The result was that, in a very interesting way, the peasants began to be exploited more and more, and the civil servants began to make great demands on the Government, and the Government could get no money, because the French started to say, “Look, you know, we don't want ... For example, a man called Raymond Cartier would say, “Look, we want to build a high school in Nancy; we don't want to build it in Niamey, in Africa. We want

our own place. So the French Government found itself under more pressure to withdraw aid, plus the Africans were doing crazy things such as insisting on Mercedes or Citroens or Cadillacs and all that sort of thing. They were doing things like that. And it's vulgar. In a very interesting way, it's vulgar. So as the Africans and the African politicians in Paris — they were all represented there, you know — as they would ride around Paris in their big cars, the average Frenchman started saying, “Look, we can't have that. We can't pay for these guys to run around here.” And the French began to reduce their aid and the African civil servants began to make more demands and the Governments found that they could not do it. What finally happened last July — when was it? Last July, I think, a new government took over. A military government took over and Lamizana was ousted, because the problem for many of these countries now is that unless they reduce their overhead, they can't make it. Because the peasants cannot, the peasants ... You need a lot of money to develop infrastructure, and this is the problem for contemporary Africa. And we were, during my period there, we were reducing our aid. In a way I became very angry, I think, with academia while there, because we were ... it was becoming quite clear then that we could not have guns in Vietnam and butter here.

The Great Society of Johnson was under stress right here. And, of course, it was under stress in terms of aid to African countries, and Ambassador Korry, who was then stationed in Ethiopia, came out with the so-called Korry Report, in which he decided to save money by saying that we cannot develop all countries in Africa at the same time; all countries in Africa perhaps cannot be developed. There are some countries which, if given a certain amount of help, could take off. Other countries, you know, are basket cases. So the so-called Korry Report had “Concentrate” countries and “Non-concentrate” countries. The concentrate countries were Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Ghana. I think these were the ... perhaps Sudan. And the result was that those were the countries that would get our aid and the other countries would have regional projects, and the Ambassador's Fund. Now the Ambassador's Fund represented $50,000 that the Ambassador could use to

win friends and influence people. The ambassadors were supposed to use those at their discretion, using it to help with a school here, a little village and that sort of thing.

Well, that's what Washington thought, but the local people became quite suspicious of that. They said fifty thousand dollars, that's nothing. Are you guys going to ... and some ambassadors, ambassadors who followed orders would try ... fifty thousand dollars meant a thousand dollars for fifty villages. And if he could use a thousand dollars throughout the country, strategically placed, you can make fifty appearances where you can spread the name of the Americans. With a thousand dollars? And once you take a thousand dollars there you expect people to ... for Christ's sake, they will spend about a thousand dollars just buying champagne for your welcome.

So, the Africans saw through that and ... well, against policy or taking local realities into consideration, I played ball with the locals. I said, “Look, three thousand dollars,” you know. “Ten projects, you know, five thousand dollars apiece. That's all I can ...” and, of course, the Africans were just as bad as the State Department. They wanted five thousand dollars to go to their village. (laughs) That's the way life is. Politics, you know. “Oh, yes, Mr. Ambassador, five thousand dollars, oh yeah.” (snaps fingers). You know, saying, “The old man has come, the old man, you know, the old man has come to see me, you know. Come over to the house for dinner and you know, talking about father's ...” And you know, “The American ambassador is here, has come to us, you know.” And, “Yeah, we'll get you that school. Yeah, you'll get that school. Of course, we can't ... five thousand dollars will probably buy only the galvanized iron or a few bags of cement, but you've got to mobilize local people.” “Yes, yes, yes.”

So the day comes where the school is built and I run down and drinks and champagne and making a speech, the largess of the United States, but that's that. So that became, then, it became a drag. Then the question of regional projects, I began to lose my AID people to Dakar. Dakar became a center then for a region. And we were supposed to put some

money in the region. Well, of course, the local people said, you know, you put money into Dakar and Senghor is not going to let any money come over here, and I agree with that.

But again, this is where I think race becomes, not even race, but race and local, local responsibility, because Frank, Frank was in Ghana, and I don't know what he said in his own thing ...

Q: Williams...

SKINNER: Yes. But I think that he had problems with Frank Pinder, who was his AID man. And Frank Pinder was in the Foreign Service for a long time and Frank was an old hand at AID. He probably saw everything between ... before Williams came. But Frank Williams was an imperious gentleman and. I'm not quite sure he got along very well with Pinder.

Now I wanted to work a deal with Pinder. It was a complicated deal. I wanted, because I was interested in getting some trucks to transport cattle, and I was supposed to get the trucks from Guinea. If I could have gotten ... the trucks were supposed to come through Guinea. I can't remember the details. But it was going to be a deal between Upper Volta, Guinea, and Ghana, because the trucks were supposed to take cattle from Upper Volta to Ghana. And that didn't work out because Frank Pinder was not collaborating with us, because Frank had his money — Frank Pinder had his money in Ghana. Ghana was “Concentrate” and he was not going to share it. But during that time Franklin Williams got together with Robert Gardner, a Ghanaian, who was in charge of the Economic Commission for Africa. And Williams called myself, Knox, Gardner and another — the Ambassador to Togo — to Accra to have a regional meeting. And we were trying to work out something. It got nowhere, but the point was that from my perspective I saw this as — of all five or six of us there, only one a white person — I saw this as black ambassadors representing the United States getting together with an African who was in charge of the Economic Commission for Africa, trying to use whatever power or whatever we had to help. Again, it didn't fly.

Q: Do you think that as a black ambassador you suffered any handicaps because of your blackness? Do you think that its not flying in some way had anything to do ...

SKINNER: No. I never felt as a black ambassador not getting anything. I felt that as an Ambassador to Upper Volta, Upper Volta didn't have that priority.

Q: I see.

SKINNER: And, as a matter of fact, I can't honestly say that anything ever happened to me because I was black.

Q: No special handicaps?

SKINNER: No, none, not a single one that I can think of now.

Q: What about advantages?

SKINNER: The advantages of ... of ... I've spoken. Well, in terms of local people, yes, no question. Access... Of course, I received the second highest ...I probably ... I'm probably the one ambassador from any country to have gotten the Grand Commander of the, you know, of the Voltaic National Order, the second highest decoration. So, and my relations are still very much ... you know, I go back and forth. So I have no problem with that.

I felt that I was there at a very difficult point. Aid was being cut back. You know, I was very conscious of using the power and prestige of the United States to help. Let me give you an example of what I mean. There's the dean of the diplomatic corp. Now, historically there were two patterns. One was that the Papal Nuncio, the Papal representative, he was the dean. He would represent the ambassadors vis-a-vis the local people. If there were problems, the dean ... If an ambassador had gotten out of line, for example, before his government would be asked to call him back, the President might call the Papal Nuncio and say, “Well, tell the man that he is overstepping his bounds of, you know ... that that

lady he is seeing is somebody's wife. Tell him to straighten up." Or if an ambassadois having trouble with the minister, he will then tell the dean, "Well, you know, look, I'm having trouble."

Now, after the Napoleonic wars and those countries which were anti-clerical had no representative from the Vatican, so Papal Nuncios were not deans. It was very interesting to have Papal Nuncio, because, you know, the Pope didn't have many divisions. So that kind of in between heaven and earth they could play this mediating role, in structural terms, as anthropologists would say. Anyway, those countries which became anti-clerical and all the Protestant countries, began to use seniority of arrival and presentation of credentials for the deanship of the diplomatic corps. For example, many Latin American countries here ... Colombia ... The Ambassador from Colombia to the United States was here for twenty years and nobody ever is going to get the deanship of the diplomatic group in Washington except Colombia until that guy has to be put in a wheelbarrow and taken off. They'll keep you as ambassador forever, those countries that have the deanship because there's a certain amount of prestige. It means that you do get a chance to go to the White House. You know that if important people are coming they don't want to invite little Colombia, but they will invite little Colombia because its ambassador represents all of those who are unimportant.

Now, when the French were retreating and they were helping their people to set up foreign services and all that, they managed to get the French Ambassador as a dean, automatically. Now that wasn't very nice. Guinea, of course, didn't like that, and, of course, many of the younger foreign ministers felt that that was an imposition; the French were taking advantage. In Upper Volta not only was the French Ambassador the dean of the corps but, apparently, I don't know where it evolved, but I suspect, I think I know how it evolved. I think that it might have evolved with the French Ambassador saying, come over for a cocktail before going to the palace. And, of course, they would line up in order of seniority after him. Well, now that ticked me off because, well, when I got there Levasseur was the French Ambassador and he was an arrogant son-of-a-gun, a pro-consul of the

old school. With me the French were — I've always sensed this even when I was an anthropologist — the French were caught in a bind. Officially they were not racist. They thought in terms of civilized and non-civilized. The Africans were uncivilized, so the French could be arrogant. The Afro-Americans represented another kettle of fish, because, you see, we were civilized. And also, they realized that for us race was a problem. So they always were very careful to respect the fact that we were “civilized” - in quotation marks - and they didn't want to appear racists, because the French were not supposed to be racists. So I always had this very interesting thing, and plus I was from one of the great schools, Columbia, so it was ... I always ... I knew ... I knew. I had some crazy contacts with the big people in Paris. So when I got there, I presented a problem with the French Ambassador. Of course, he didn't think much of Malians or the Ghanaians or the lesser breeds. But for me it was always ... I represented the United States, plus I spoke the language. I was a professor, and Doctor and all that. So it was interesting...

Q: But you were clearly perceived differently from the others.

SKINNER: Yes. But, he was also racist and his racism would come out when, “You know, Mr. Ambassador, you know, these people here, you know. France, France... We're doing our best.” And he always let me know that they were doing better than we were doing and that galled me no end. It galled me no end. And everyday, of course, he was at some reception where France would be turning over a few million francs and taking over, and taking the next day two million francs. But he would always be in the limelight and whenever I would do something, a little project, “Oh, Mr. Ambassador, I heard you were, I heard you on the radio. Ah, yes, I liked your speech, oh yes.” He always let me know that he was on top of everything I was doing. You know, it's a very interesting position to be in, because I represented the United States. Plus I was in the war and I was in France, and to have this little Frenchman, clever, very polite, let me know, look, this is our territory here and you Americans are not supposed to be very heavy, you would know, my friend, that France is ... And I'll tell you something else about that.

Well, I accepted that because he was, again, he was my elder in the tradition. He knew more than I did and I was ... I really wanted to get ... After the initial visits of courtesy and all that, he would come over; he would call and say, “Can I come over and talk to you?” and just have you know, and let me ... you know, trying to get a sense of who I was, what I knew and all that sort of thing. And we became quite friendly. But it was quite clear he was the boss there and I resented it.

Well, when he left his new man came and the big deal, of course, was the first of January and his successor arrived there on what? the twenty-third of December and they were hurrying to get him to present his credentials so that he could be the doyen.

He represented the diplomats and so I said nothing. But the next year I told the Foreign Minister, I said, “Look, I don't like the American flag to be flying after the French flag. I don't like to be in any cortege where that flag comes before our flag.” I said, “I'm going to be late.” They were waiting for me. They waited for me, but I didn't show up until they had entered the palace. Then my ... I came in there, I was a little too late (laughter) ... I must tell ... That's the truth; I was a little too late. And they probably said, “Uhm, black.” Anyway, the next week an order came from the Foreign Minister, to the ambassadors: “From now on they will assemble in the palace courtyard.” It meant then that our flag didn't have to be seen behind the French flag. So I did that. Because the Foreign Minister said the reason for my being late is that I had gotten a telegram from Washington and having to zip over to the French chancellery, that made me late. So if I'd come directly, I would have been on time. Therefore when we meet there, fine. I did that. That's one time I was able to use the power and prestige of the United States, even in a symbolic way, not to ... to liberate those people a bit from the French. However...

Q: ...and even symbolically that was terribly important, don't you think? ...

SKINNER: Right, freed them. Now but I lost a number of things, and the thing I lost I think was the ... a meeting of the local West African Economic Community. They had met in

Dakar and the American Ambassador to Liberia, it was reported to me, was able to get Cadillacs for the Senegalese to put at the disposal of the visiting African presidents. Now, the people in Upper Volta wanted to hold this meeting in Ouagadougou and I was all in favor of that. But there were two things. One, the French were against it.

Q: Why?

SKINNER: They didn't want the West African Community, that's all, because they were not yet ... they were suspicious of any grouping of West African states. Very suspicious of that. And, again, Upper Volta was also viewed with suspicion because the young Foreign Minister was seen as wanting to recreate a West African something, region or something like that. So that ... they ... they... my telegrams to ... to Washington also copied to Paris. We see the ... well, what happened was the people in Paris asked the French what they thought about that. The American Embassy in Paris asked the French Government what the French Government thought about ... what it knew about these plans.

Well, Paris contacted Ouagadougou and the French Ambassador asked for an appointment. And he let me know in no uncertain terms that Paris did not want that. Well, the thing that really killed it ... now that itself would have killed it. But, of course, I couldn't get thirty-two Cadillacs for any meeting. How can you get thirty-two Cadillacs in Ouagadougou? Fly them in? These are the things you lose. That didn't fly at all. The French were against it and our Embassy in Paris was not going to take any flack from the French Government for doing something in Ouagadougou. No way!

So, after a while then it was clear to me then that in terms of being able to do a great deal over and above what one normally does, the point is to get to a big country with a lot of power or prestige. In other words, after two years I had outgrown Upper Volta. Upper Volta was, again, a small country, insignificant as far as overall U.S. global policy is concerned.

And this gets us today the basic problem, I think for a black ambassador. And that has to do with the nature of foreign policy — foreign policy being, I think, an elite occupation it's

always been, because it means the point at which the collectivity comes into contact with outsiders. At that point in time collectivities are represented by spokespersons who are big enough or important enough not be constrained by local particularities. They've got to be above it all. So the sovereign is the one then who receives and sends out ambassadors to sit near to foreign governments, to be the spokesperson or spokespersons now of the president. If you are a minister you're ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary means that you have all the powers of the sovereign who sends you out. Okay?

In most cases states send out important persons... all the states used to send out brothers of the ruler or members of the Royal Family. Today we still do it. It takes Mrs. Reagan or the Vice President to represent the United States at the wedding of Prince Charles. We could not send either a senator and certainly not Moynihan. Had we sent Moynihan or Kennedy, we would have been making a statement about Ireland. Okay?

Q: Yes.

SKINNER: And if we had to choose, we had to send the Secretary of State, or we would have to choose if we had a Roosevelt or an Adam, a member of an old aristocratic family, as a senator, we could have sent that person. If not, nobody else is acceptable as representing the United States. It means then that in structural terms, regardless of what a president feels, unless he can find someone who represents the essence of America, that person will not be viewed with favor in the state to which that person is sent.

In this century, even if Roosevelt or Teddy, or any of those persons had thought so highly of Booker T. Washington ... to have sent a Booker T. Washington to a new African state ... To send a Booker T. Washington to these states, that would not have been accepted, because Booker T. Washington was not seen as having the kind of clout and prestige in these United States that would make him acceptable. You see, it has nothing to do with the quality of the person. It has to do with the structure. And for a long time, although Haiti

and Liberia became independent, we did not send ministers, because to look at the record, the debates in the Senate, the notion that these states, and it was conceded, naturally sending their representatives would present the spectre of black ambassadors with their sabled wives, bewigged and bejeweled in the White House. And in the Senate, no way. It was only during the Civil War that Haiti and Liberia were recognized, because it was only then, and even then, we asked specifically, “Do you expect persons of African descent to serve as ambassadors?” The Haitians said no. And, of course, the Liberians agreed. In other words, the calibre... the position of blacks within American society will, has, will always condition whether or not they are acceptable as representing the United States.

Now, one of the problems that I see, one of the dilemmas: How does one become a black leader in these United States? One becomes a black leader in the United States by having an adversary relationship with the Government. And even those black leaders who do not have an adversary relationship, the very fact that they are ... To be a black leader you have to do one thing. You have to ameliorate the position of blacks in this society. If you're not doing that, you cannot be a black leader.

There is more. There's not a single black leader, a single black person who becomes a leader, who is not trying to do something to improve the black. Now this puts you in structural opposition to the Government, whether you're Booker T. Washington or DuBois. You're trying to break caste. United as the fingers ... united as the hands attached to the fingers, he is trying to ... he is trying to break up. So black ... you see ... One of the interesting things about black ambassadors is the possibility thaI'm not talking about the career people — at some poinin time they had an adversary relationship with the Government. And this means then that their view of U.S. policy overseas has to be their view of American society. It's not good enough, not good enough. In other words, the danger for the black ambassador is ... a kind of supermoral position. We can tell this country what this country should be. In the same sense as we're trying to move this country forward in terms of, of getting more rights for ourselves here, we are pushing this

country. Okay? And I think we tend to see this country's position in the world in these terms. So again and again you get the Andrew Young syndrome.

Andrew Young is a classic case. An adversary relationship? That adversary relationship puts him to the head of the class. He became Representative from Georgia, and a Representative from Georgia, ironically, the same state as the President. So the President could send him to sit in the U.N. Okay? He is acceptable. What was his behavior? Embarrassed the President no end, in Califano's book, In Governing America. The President said, “You've embarrassed me by calling the British racist.” And, of course, when he thought to resign, because he said, “What kind ... what kind of nonsense not talking to the PLO? You've got to talk to them.” And as Sadat told us yesterday, you've got to talk.. So Andrew Young is a classic case of that.

But the others ... the other ambassadors that I'm working on now, it's showing that they're always pushing America. Always pushing, always pushing, always pushing, pushing, pushing. And they're not satisfied with America's policy. They're always, in other words, they find themselves in structural ambiguity. I'm talking about ... Mr. Mercer Cook, I don't know what he feels. I think he resigned because he felt that he could not do his job and if he could not do that, what the hell was he doing?

So you got this very interesting situation. And I blame the black historians in failing to draw this very important theoretical conclusion from the structured ambiguity, because I think many of them feel that by saying that we have problems as ambassadors. Well we don't all have problems. Ambassador Reinhardt did not. Yet I don't think there was a single black who was declared PNG (persona non grata). Not a single one. As far as I know, not a single state said they wanted a black ambassador out because he misbehaved himself.

Black ambassadors seem to me to be caught in a very interesting position where they, you know, like Ambassador Haynes. He was the one who suggested that Algeria would be the state to be used to free the hostages. He did it. I don't know if Beverly Carter talked

to you about it. But Beverly did not believe that ordinary individuals should have the same responsibility as far as Foreign Service people in terms of hostages. So when the Zairoise Marxists wanted to negotiate, Beverly said, right ... But Kissinger's position was, look, you can't do that. He took a different position. I think the book I'm going to publish would not say that some black ambassadors were not ordinary human beings, since they were. But the point is that I'm interested in their structural position and it will be a hell of a long time before an Afro-American can be chosen Ambassador to France or Ambassador to the Court of Saint James. Oh, my God! I don't think we'll ever see that one until we get us to the vice presidency. So, in other words, you must see black ambassadors in structural terms before you can even talk about their effectiveness as ambassadors. But the point is that even those persons ... those states ... that if those states had refused black ambassadors because the black ambassadors don't have the power and prestige in the United States that they would like their ambassadors to have, even those states are saying something about the nature of American society. So when Clinton Knox, I think, was not given the agr#ment for Honduras, the Hondurans were saying that we will not accept this man. But they were saying something else. They were saying, in your society you don't think enough of this man to give him first-class citizenship. So it's a very interesting dialectic here, and I think many blacks and whites don't see this. This is why they come up with kind of crazy things about Africans not wanting black ambassadors.

Q: Dr. Skinner, I know you indicated you have an appointment downtown this afternoon and we don't want to overshoot your time this afternoon. That brings us, all the things you've said have pretty much brought us down to a question that we generally like to ask our ambassadors. How about your work as Ambassador, and in your case Upper Volta? What are the things you would consider your most important achievements in that position? And then reversing the coin, what were your greatest disappointments? Do you want to deal with that now? Would you like to hold it until the next session?

SKINNER: I think I'd like to hold it until the next session, those two questions.

Q: Fine. Shall we end this session?

SKINNER: Yes. Okay. Good.

Q: Thank you, Dr. Skinner.

***

Today is August 9, 1981. Dr. Skinner, yesterday when we discussed your term as Ambassador in Upper Volta, you kindly talked about the events which led to your entry into the diplomatic service. You discussed in great detail your experiences in Upper Volta, some of the better ones and some of your frustrations. One of the things you mentioned early on was the delay in your being able to present your letters, and you said it had something to do with the previous Ambassador's performance there. Do you think that incident clouded your term at all?

SKINNER: No. I don't think it had anything at all to do with it. I think they were trying to send the Embassy a message, which was that we should watch our relationship with the local population and notify the Government of our activities. And once that message had come across loud and clear and once I respected the modalities of the Government's policy, it went very well. As a matter of fact, my relationship with the Foreign Minister was very cordial. I had known him for a long time. And I remember that I had heard about a ministerial change, that he was going to be replaced, and I told him. As a matter of fact, as soon as I got wind of it, I went to his home one afternoon. I called him up and told him I wanted to come over for a drink and we talked. Of course, he had a lot of people in his house as usual, and I asked him to step outside. And I told him what I heard and he was very, very pleased to know that he was going to be sent on to Brussels as an ambassador. So it went very well.

In terms of the ... my relationship with the Foreign Minister, I felt that I had to establish a whole set of norms for diplomatic discourse. For example, most of the ambassadors

worked directly with the President. They tended not to go through the Foreign Ministers, most of whom were very young individuals. Well, I knew about the difficulty that African ambassadors had in seeing people in the Department. Most ambassadors did see the President when they presented their letters. Almost none saw the Secretary of State on a regular basis, and they were assigned to not even the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa. They scarcely ever saw him. And their main contact was the desk officer, a rather junior person. So these individuals had almost no contact.

In contrast, being in a small post, you ... the American Ambassador, the French Ambassador or anybody could see the President. But I felt that I didn't want to be faced with the charge that we had access to their President whereas they had no access to our hierarchy. So I told the Foreign Minister that I would do work with him. I would not deal with the President. I would work with him, unless, of course I had difficulties with him, in which case, of course, I would go to the head. He was surprised and I think he appreciated that. Except one day I went to his office and he said, “You know, the President asked about you.” I said, “Yeah?” He said, “Yeah. He hadn't seen you for a whole month.” So I said, “Well, there was no reason to see him. I was seeing you.” He said, “Well, you know the Mossi. You ought to see him about at least once every two weeks.” So I said, “Fine, but what I said still goes. I will not discuss business with him. And I would go to the President and just... I would just tell him, you know, I discussed this, this, this, with your Foreign Minister and that everything is all right and then he would stop talking.” So we got into all sorts of things.

The other thing, of course, was our intelligence service was much better than theirs. They didn't have access to information except through Agence France Press, which was the local radio. So sometimes he'll call and ask me if I could come over, and I would have an idea of what he wanted. And I would sometimes take telegrams I received from the Department. Of course, I wouldn't leave the telegrams there; I would just read the important parts so that if, in the event of a coup next door or something like that, I would brief him. I felt it was the task of ... it was my responsibility, I think, to ... have people show

respect to African Governments. True, they were small and we were very big, and in many cases they were not respected. But I felt it was my duty to ... to change all of that.

Q: Was there ever an instance when you did have to go over the Foreign Minister's head in a sense, go directly to the President?

SKINNER: No. No. I... No it wasn't, no, we had nothing like that. Again, we had no major problems. No, we ... I never got into difficulties with the Voltaics over anything. So in a way, it went ... it was very smooth. I understood the culture fairly well, so much so that, one day I was talking to the Foreign Minister — I was in his office — and the phone rang. He excused himself and started to speak French and then looked up and saw me and began to speak in More, and then he looked at me again and started to speak French and he said, “You” ... (laughs)” ... you're a dangerous man” (laughs) ... I was amused because, of course, he felt that, that by going to More, it would be secret. Then he realized that, well, I knew More” too. So I thought that was very funny. But by-and-large, there were no problems. No ...

Something like that one had to deal with an element of self-respect. For example, I had made a tour of the country, and I tried to get to the rural areas at least once every six months. I would make a tour of the north, or the west, or the east, and I'd be gone for about a week. And when Ted Roosevelt was around he would go ahead of me and make arrangements, to make sure that everything was all right. And he did a good job in his very aristocratic way, noblesse oblige of the first order. Of course, I didn't forget for one moment that he was really top drawer, and every once in a while he would ask for an appointment to bring in one of the blond “Smithies” or Mt. Holyoke or Vassar kids who would just fly in for the weekend and just come to say hello and so, and so.

But I would go around the country and try to get a feel for what was going on, and I would always brief the President when I got back. I guess he was checking to find out exactly what I found out and I was trying to check him out, too. And in '68, when I got back to

Ouagadougou, I told him that I had encountered information that the crops the year before were not good, and that I thought that if he wanted, he could talk to me about getting PL 480 grain. Now, about two months before that there were several articles in the Le Monde dealing with PL 480 and how the State Department was trying to help the Mid-Western farmers by almost dumping grain in Africa and other areas. It was a very nasty article. So when I talked to the President, I said, “Well, look, we need at least a three month period.” I had gone there, I had gone to his office around, I think it was November, because the harvest is finished then. And I know that the hungry period in Upper Volta is around March — March, April. This is the time when last year's harvest is almost finished and the early millet will not be ready until, or, the early maize will not be ready until about June. But it's a very crucial period because you don't have very much food and people have got to expend a great deal of energy planting. But we need about three months lead time in order to get any grain from the States.

So I told him, “Look, the harvest is not very good and if you think you will need our food, let me know.” And he said, “No.” He said, he looked and me and he said, “Well, the people are lazy,” which sort of surprised me. And I started to say, “Well, yeah, you're Samogho, and ... you're talking about Mossi.” And with my own ethnicity. He said, “But over and above that, if America keeps on sending grain here, people will lose their will to work and we will be dependent on you for our food. I didn't appreciate that at all, because I thought he was wrong. As it turned out, '69, '70 there was a disaster in the Sahel, and when the Manchester Guardian and The New York Times, Le Monde, and the Der Stern began to publish, they first of all tried to deny that there was a famine. But they were ashamed of themselves. They were ashamed. I mean, the President thought that I was trying to hook him into a position of dependency on the United States. So that was a bit disturbing to me that he would have thought that. But again, countries do that. He was right. He tried to protect his country from United States domination.

Q: You spoke of that severe drought in the Sahel. Did you see any signs of that coming before you left?

SKINNER: Yes. Yu know the ecological situation is so ... it's so ... so fragile that the people are, very, very conscious of rains. So you will say, you know, “How are things?” and they will say, “Well, two rains, that's all we need; two rains. If we don't have any rains, the two rains or three rains, there'll be disaster.” And I knew about that, because as I went through the country, that was the subject of a great deal of discussion. And the people, you know, they were signaling that things were bad, because the year before, apparently, there was a shortfall. So by '68, although they were conscious — the people as a rule were conscious — but the Administration, I think, was being very careful; didn't want to get the people hooked into us. So when the drought ... they kept ... things kept on becoming progressively worse. So they really ran into it by '71.

At that point we had here at Columbia, if you remember, a whole series of events trying to get some money, raising some money for the Sahel.

Q: I recall...

SKINNER: Yes. So that was the disturbing thing. I think the most difficult problem was getting aid, and the other thing, of course, had to do with their lack of an infrastructure and the complete control of the economy by the French. It was very frustrating to me. You'd go to a minister to talk about something and he would bring in his French counterpart and the French counterpart will take over. At this point in time I didn't feel like saying anything. I felt like saying, okay, if you have to depend upon the Frenchman, well, I'll send my own person. There's no sense in both of us talking, because you don't know exactly what's going on. So that was frustrating, their complete domination of the economy and their political life by the French. That was disturbing to me.

Q: Would you say that was perhaps one of the most frustrating things about that term?

SKINNER: No, I think ... no, not that so much, the friendship. I think the problem of aid, just providing aid for that country to begin to move. For example, I wanted to put in a road from Foda, one of the towns, I wanted to put in a road there to lead to Ghana. And they sent out somebody from Washington, a consultant, and his view of trying to assess the need for a road was to spend four hours I think, a half a day, checking the number of trucks that passed (laughs). So when the guy got back to Ouagadougou, I said, “Look, you know something? Unless a truck was hauling gold, it'd be silly to use that road.” In other words, the normal thing you do in the States if you want to check the amount of traffic, you'd sit there with a count on how many trucks or cars have passed. But, you couldn't do that there. The technology was all wrong, because I had gone over that area. That area is very fertile. But the road was so bad that people ... unless you were really sure of making a lot of money, you just can't put a truck in there at all. But the United States, you know, it wanted to go about trying to ascertain or assess the needs of these countries according to its own standard. And the frustrating thing would be a man would go back and say, “Well there's no need for a road. There's no need to improve the road, because the amount of traffic is so small that to expend that amount of money makes no sense.”

I said yesterday about the Korry Report and that the Korry Report, written by Ambassador Korry with the assistance of many academics, really ruined in my mind the aid structure in much of Africa. And I think I met with the Assistant Secretary of State in Tangiers — I think it must have been in 1968 — and all of us were complaining about the Korry Report because those of us who were in so-called non-concentrate countries felt the lack of aid. And Palmer, Ambassador Palmer, who's Assistant Secretary of State, he said, “Well, this was done with the best of advice from American specialists.” It turned out that people like Bill Hance here at Columbia, Wallerstein and Elliot Berg and others like that, they were the ones to give advice.

Q: Based on what?

SKINNER: Based on ... apparently, their expertise, and that really ticked me off, because I said, my God, you mean to say that these are my friends from academia who are doing things and they are supposed to be friends of Africa? And in a way I, I never recovered from that view of academia, because I came back very angry with my colleagues.

Q: Korry's position on that — first of all, I'm not sure whether you explained how he was commissioned, in a sense, I guess, to prepare that report or not.

SKINNER: Well...

Q: Who was Korry?

SKINNER: Korry was an ambassador to Chile and then he left Chile and went to... was named ambassador to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I think he worked for Lifeor one of those magazines...

Q: A Republican?

SKINNER: No, a Democrat. Now there was a need for a new structure they based on ... the lack of money due to the Vietnam War and I suspect that Korry had that task because he was in Ethiopia, and the Economic Commission for Africa, which is the U.N.'s commission on Africa, was based in Addis. So I think that because they were supposed to have had most of the data in Addis Ababa, that Korry was given that task to write the report. Now when I charged Wallerstein later on with being unconscionable with respect to the African situation, he said that I shouldn't blame the academics; that Korry's Report was probably written before he came over here to ask ... to ask questions of academics. But I said well, in which case then the academics should have tried to put him right on this but apparently didn't. So the aid situation was the most frustrating one that I had to deal with.

The other thing was, we didn't, the United States, didn't raise protest when the Soviets came into Upper Volta. And I think that the reason why, because under the Yam#ogo

Government the Soviets were not there. But as a function of Yam#ogo's fall the Voltaics decided, well, they needed the Soviets. They expected a great deal from the Soviets, and I think they thought that by bringing the Soviets in they could play the Soviets against the United States.

Well, also, my DCM was based in Moscow and he came to Ouagadougou as a great cold-warrior. But my feeling about the Soviets, I'd seen the Ambassador and that man was a short man and a nice guy. He seemed to be so much out of it that he didn't represent, I didn't feel he was a threat personally. We knew when they moved in. Our CIA came in and identified members of the KGB, so we knew who they were and that sort of thing. And I think there were telegrams dealing with, well, we were being ... we were prepared to offer asylum to any defectors but the ... in terms of protocol, the Soviet Ambassador sat next to me. He came after I did, so we sat next to each other. And we talked; we talked all the time. You know, we visited back and forth. The Soviets were no threat and they were less a threat because they didn't provide aid. Their position was that these governments were capitalists and that these governments had to go through an important period of capitalism before socialism can become a reality and they were about, about to use this aid to, to support capitalists. So they were there. They had a presence but they did not pose a threat to us, the United States. So that gave no issue at all. The cold war did not come to Ouagadougou when I was there.

We did manage to send a few individuals to Saigon, United States Information Service, to get somebody. We wanted these people to know what the war in Vietnam was all about. And one guy came back and visited me, saying to me that he had seen our people in Saigon and they told him that when he got back, he should come and talk to me about his anti-Communism and all that sort of thing. And he did. The next time I saw the President I said, “Who's this guy Bassolet?” Of course, he then smiled and said, “Oh we knew that he came to see you.” And I, I just changed the subject. So, again, it's the whole question of how one perceives one's relationships to the local government, how one assesses what they're trying to do. For example, May Day, the fledgling labor unions would be

parading and they would pass in front of the residence shouting, you know, and I would (laughs) go up in the balcony and wave to them. (laughs). I guess it was unorthodox but I was interested in what they were doing, and, of course, there was certain joviality. They were not very angry with us, at least not at that point in time. So that as soon as I heard the drumming and all that, I'd come outside and wave, and that's it. And this is the point. I guess that was unorthodox behavior from an American Ambassador, who should be hostile. There was no reason to be. And my DCM, who came to Ouagadougou ready to fight the Soviets as a function of his having a hard time when he was in Moscow, I told him, “Look, Nkomo is not here. Our task is to try to get as much aid as possible. And that was the name of the game in Africa then, not the Soviets or even the Chinese or anybody else. The question is how would these countries make any progress? And I think that during this period, it went with the politics of aid. And when governments fell, they fell as a function of the frustration of one group of elites against the other group of elites as a function of who was doing what with the scarce resources they had. So the cold war was sort of lost.

The famous radical in town was Joseph Ki-Zerbo, but, again, I knew Joseph before. I knew him when I was there as a researcher. So we used to talk. I would have him over. We talked and he was ... I think he saw me as an American Ambassador, he saw me as possibly the tool of the imperialist, but he was a historian and we talked history. And we talked about Upper Volta in general. But, again, I didn't see, I didn't see him as a threat and so far we've had a coup, but he has been in the opposition now for the last ... he's been in the opposition now for the last fifteen years, and the chances of his taking over are very slim. The military now is in power, so that wasn't the issue.

The question was aid and the inability to get aid, I think, if I look back on it, was the, the greatest sense of frustration. The roads, to get roads. The question of trying to get somebody interested in the manganese, and we were not about to get involved in that. And so Upper Volta, their complaint still is that the United States didn't reward its friends. And it didn't reward its friends. It's only when you become Communist that the United

States begins to pay attention to you. If you were just minding your business, the United States ignored you. And that was the major problem.

Q: Dr. Skinner, given your very meager resources, the financial aid so terribly important to developing countries like this, what did you have to work with, so to speak, what little you had, what would you consider to have been the most, of that work, what part of it do you think was the most important? What part did you find most satisfying or do you feel you made the greatest contribution to the Republic?

SKINNER: I think it wasn't getting PL 480. Getting food, that was the big thing. Getting food to the people, that was the most important thing I did. And they knew about that. They knew I was working on that issue and I was always ready to ... they knew they could depend upon me to try to help organize conferences or things like that, you know. When they wanted to have the West Africa Economic Community meeting in Dakar, in Ouagadougou, they knew they could come to me and I would be sympathetic to it. But they also understood, I think, that Upper Volta was not an important country to the United States. That was the problem there.

I suspect, providing food. Of course, we had the three-million-dollar ranch, which was the capital, the most important group capital project, but that was done before I got there. It was put in place before I got there. And it was my unhappy experience to have to liquidate it and to try to salvage what was a bum project. So that wasn't the happiest thing, but, again, I did. what I could with that.

Q: Would you say that project was programmed to fail?

SKINNER: No. It was that the Near East Foundation was incompetent. I was around when the project was being thought about. And I saw then the problems of the project and, of course, I wasn't surprised at all when it failed, but I don't think it was programmed to fail. AID did not take into consideration many of the sociological factors involved, such as the inability of the Government to put so much land at the disposal of the AID project. They

thought that because you had a. few marginal cultivators around, they could fence in so many square miles to put a ranch, but the local people resisted that.

Again, it was just the incompetence of the Near East Foundation, lack of knowledge of the local ecology, the local grasses. For example, they wanted to introduce American cattle and had no notion at all of the behavior of local cattle. One of the first things I said, well, look, get some idea of how local cattle perform. I advised them to buy a little herd and monitor the herds. You hire a young Fulani and monitor the herd over a period of four months, try to understand how the local cattle operate in this environment so that when American cattle are brought in, they would have a baseline from which to understand how American cattle can adapt. No, they thought that this was a new ball game and thaonce you brought American cattle in, you can almost recreate a king ranch. Well, you don't do that; you couldn't do that. And that was a disaster. It was frustrating in terms of how the United States operated. But that was the situation.

Q: What are your fondest memories of Upper Volta?

SKINNER: Well, I think that being a black man representing the United States. That was the big thing. That was the big thing. I saw it primarily in terms of what my ambassadorship meant in terms of the struggle of a race of people for recognition in the world system, that was it. And I felt that it was my task then to aid this process. And I think that's very important. I think that over and above who we are in terms of our economic system, we, we ... this country is a very important country and there're a lot of blacks here, and the blacks here have made a very important contribution to the world of the black man or black people. And I thought that it was important for the race to have this representation in Africa. I think that was very important. For me the symbolic value was important — attending things and meetings, ceremonies. Of course, whenever we would give anything, whether it's money for a vaccination program or building a local school, or making a gift of medicines, everything, of course, or giving trucks, there were always ceremonies. And I like that. I thought it was good to be involved in things like that. Those are my fondest

memories. In a sense this was the culmination of a career pattern. I'd worked in the rural areas; I'd worked in Ouagadougou; and then I moved to the level of the nation states. And I thought that was, that was good. I think it was very, very good.

Q: And it's rare, I would think, that someone would have that kind of an opportunity.

SKINNER: Yeah, yeah...

Q: ...because you knew them first as an anthropologist and then to have the opportunity to see it from that other...

SKINNER: ...right...

Q: ...perspective, too, it must have been...

SKINNER: It was interesting. Again, from a personal standpoint, all I'm talking about is the ability to, to do things. For one example, I worked in the Nob#r# area and of the things I did was to build a local clinic. I built it and stocked the medicine. And I opened it. I went down there for the grand opening of it and here was, here was something I did for the people who were kind enough to permit me to live with them for fourteen months in the rural areas. So that was good. I met by the, at the entrance to the district, I was met by the cavaliers with their horses and guns and boom, and boom, and boom, and boom, and that was good. That was good; that was very satisfying that you could do something like that. And it also throws things in perspective. It also means that you can do more things for more people the higher up you go, and I said, you know, if I ever got involved with another project or something like that, if I ever got involved with the State Department again, you can bet your life that I would try to do for Upper Volta what I did for the people of Nob#r#. Because the individual does count in terms of decisions. You can make a difference if you are aware where the decisions are made. So it was almost ... it was very, very easy to make sure that the people of the Nob#r# region would get enough, would get part of the grain that came in. A delegation came and said, well, we need a. clinic. And I was able to

just call in my AID man and say, well, look, you know, I would like to have this done, and it was done. Well, that's good. If I ever got involved in the Government again, then I will do the same thing for Upper Volta. I will just tell the people, “Look, in terms of your AID projects, I would like to see so much money going to Upper Volta,” and that's it. And if I get a chance, I'll do that. In other words, you can do a lot if you have the power, and I think that's important.

Q: Thank you. You really just answered in effect the last question I was going to ask you: If you had to do it over again, what if anything would you do differently?

SKINNER: Well, what I would is, of course, I would want to have a more important country. But more than that, I would want to work on the level of Washington. I think that policy making is very important. You know, within the context of instructions and all that sort of thing, one can do a hell of a lot. The myth is that ambassadors just receive messages and transmit messages. That's nonsense; that's not true.

The State Department always tells you, unless it's counter productive, U.N. structured, or we would like you to do so, and so. Well, depending on what you want to do with that message, the message, as you deliver the message, you will structure your instructions in such a way as to have happen what you want to have happen.

For example, let's take the relationship between Upper Volta and the Ivory Coast with respect with a dialogue with South Africa, okay? Johnson, the Johnson Administration was not yet prepared to lean on South Africa. As a matter of fact, I believe that the State Department felt that one way of dealing with the South Africans was to initiate dialogue between the South Africans and the rest of black Africa. Now, Ambassador Morgan, who was in the Ivory Coast working with Houphouet, felt that Houphouet, being capitalist and all that sort of thing, a good friend of France, and the French were giving arms to the South Africans, Ambassador Morgan was consciously trying to establish a dialogue between the Ivory Coast and the South Africans. And as usual, all the telegrams he sent to the

State Department were copied to me. I was able to follow very closely what he said about Houphouet-Boigny being receptive to Vorster and all that sort of thing. And of course, I was against that; I was against dialogue. I felt that the South Africans were hopeless and that dialogue was not ... not the way they were going about dialogue. I thought that what they wanted to do was to make the black African states dependent upon South Africa so that the Africans would stop criticizing South Africa. And I didn't like what Morgan was doing. But normally you don't, you can't criticize another ambassador; you don't do that, unless and until he says something about your post. And I waited, waited, waited until I saw one telegram in which he said that Houphouet-Boigny believed so and so and that Houphouet said that Lamizana agreed. Well, that gave me the opportunity and I sent him a blistering telegram, because I had saved almost all of the statements made by Lamizana about South Africa.

So what I did was to say, “Look, Lamizana doesn't feel this way. The Voltaics don't feel that dialogue can help Africa and this is why.” And I was able to back this with a whole lot of data. So that if you are in a position like that you can send certain signals to the Department of State and you can try to do things. You know, the feeling you get sometimes from talking to people is that the United States does so and so and so and so. You ask, well, who does what? And. they will say, well, the Government. Well, the Government is made up of the people, and if you can have a certain input at a certain point, you can condition policy.

Let me give you an example of what probably Frank Williams has probably, would probably have this in his own stuff. It was the Chiefs of Mission meeting at Tangiers and Joe Palmer, Assistant Secretary of State, brought along some people from the Department of Defense to explain to us, the ambassadors who were meeting in Tangiers with him, why an aircraft carrier had to make a stop in Cape Town. Well, we didn't like that and this deputy or assistant secretary or something, tried to make a case for that. Well, our reaction was that that aircraft carrier does not have to go to Cape Town for refueling. We do have oil tenders. It could be fueled at sea, because we were concerned that the last time an

aircraft carrier had got into Cape Town and black sailors were discriminated against, and we didn't like that. And I think Frank got together — he called me, he called Clinton Knox, and he called a number of us together and we talked. And I think it was Frank who sent a telegram to the NAACP, or sent a telegram to Jacob Javits, and in ... and in about ... before we left there that visit was cancelled.

And, again, let's take what may have happened during this reception for Sadat. As of last, as of last Thursday, the South African rugby team was going to play here in New York. Well, Friday you had a very interesting situation. Here was Javits again, there was Koch, there was Sadat, there was Governor Carey, there was Vernon Jordan, and there was Frank, and this dialogue went on. Yesterday we heard that it was cancelled.

Now, I'm not saying that it happened as a function, that meeting at the, at the luncheon for Sadat. I'm suggesting that all of the characters were right there and a policy was made. Of course, the explanation is made that the United States, the city would have to spend four hundred thousand dollars just for cops. Well, they knew that, but something was said, something happened.

So that the important thing for me is, in terms of African policy, is the Washington base where you can say something, you can try. The United States does have many responsibilities and as you look at your own little area, your own country, you must see the country where you are in terms of its relationship to Africa and Africa's relationship to the global system in which the United States is operating. And I think the important thing is to try to get as high up in that system as possible, because the higher up you go, the more clout you have. So I think that if I had to, to do anything again, I think it would be, I would want to operate from the level of. Washington. That's what I think.

Q: Yes, thank you. Dr. Skinner, yesterday and today we've talked about your experiences as Ambassador to the Upper Volta. We thank you very much for that. That was three years out of your life, three very important years, but you are a man who has had a very

distinguished career as an anthropologist and I do know that your home, your original home was Trinidad and Tobago. The second part of the interview is the time we'd like to devote to you, the man, beginning with your birth in Tobago ... Trinidad...

SKINNER: ...Trinidad...

Q: ...Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies, and talking about your birth place, your parents, relatives, anything you'd like to share with us: your growing up years, people who influenced you and then your work as an anthropologist, because you are one of the most distinguished anthropologists in the country. And we'd like to hear more about that, too. Could you start with your birth?

SKINNER: Well, I was born the 20th of June 1924 in Cawnpore Street, the son of Ettice Francis. She had come from Barbados and then my father got involved. They remained together about three years and they broke up. Then my father came to the United States and my mother went off to Venezuela. So I was raised by her sister. Her sister was married to a Portuguese man, Francis Jardine his name was. And it was a very interesting situation, because I was very, very conscious of being a Skinner; that was very important. And after the breakup of my father and mother, my father's, my mother's sister didn't particularly care for the Skinners. I don't know if it was good reason or not. But I was very conscious of, I was very conscious of that group of persons. Plus my father would send money to me through my grandmother and, of course, that was always a big deal. Oh, my grandmother would come down and, and then, of course, the money he didn't give to me, but my grandmother when she ever visited, I knew that money had come, and that, that was great. But even so that money was more symbolic because my mother's sister, this Portuguese man, he had what, one, two, three, he had three groceries and about, oh, five houses, and so he was fairly wealthy. The Skinners were not that wealthy. The Skinners represented a strong family that with a lot of pride, a lot of dignity, rogues in a way as far as the ladies were concerned, of the first order. But there was a certain #lan, a certain kind of style in that whole thing.

They were, so that I was caught in a very interesting situation where I was able to profit from the reputation of the Skinners and I was seen as “one of those Skinners,” potentially very dangerous because not only was I a Skinner, but I was Miss Ely's nephew and that meant that there was enough money around or enough money around. So that (laughs) made me a sort of, of kind of ... potentially dangerous.

Mr. Francis, I guess I was very close to him as a child. At one point he went through, he used to drink a lot and I remember as a child, going to the rum shop, the local bar and bringing him home, once or twice, I remember that. But he also taught me a lot. We taught me to read and to write and it was the carrot and the stick in this case, the West Indies, a sweetie and a stick. And he used to leave, he used to leave sums for me to do and he would go on to town to buy supplies for the stores and when he got back he'd bring back cookies and all that and if I had done my work, I got that, and if I didn't I would get a hit over the head or something like that.

One day I remember he hit me and my aunt said that he shouldn't. That's Donald Skinner's son. And I think I was happy then, but because I escaped that. But in retrospect, I think even then I felt that was wrong, that I needed some kind of correction. Now as a child I felt ... I think that ... I had a certain number of abilities when I was a child. I was able to get information out of people, out of children, very easily. I remember that. That if I wanted anyone to find out something, and someone would say to me, “Well, I'm not going to tell you,” I knew that I had the ability to get it out of people. So kids would say, I'm not going to tell you. I don't want to talk to you. I knew that.

I did very well in school. I remember the first day I went to school, and because of the importance of the Skinners and my aunt, I received a lot of deference in school. I was shown a lot of deference around the neighborhood, because you didn't have in the upper lower class or lower middle class, you didn't have residential mobility as you moved up economically. What you did was to build a bigger house. So you remained where you were. And the houses got bigger, bigger and bigger. But the people next door

remained where they were, so that you began to get differences of class. And I was always conscious of class differences, always conscious of that. I always knew what it is to be a Skinner and I was always conscious of that. I remember that I could only play, I could play with, some days I could play with people. They would come to my, our house yard to play. I was not encouraged to go next door to play in their yard, because it was not, you know, and I used to sneak away and do it, but ... and this, of course, was a big deal.

We had a piano and the only piano on the block and the only piano for houses round. My aunt was friendly with a white family, Portuguese, who were related to her husband, I think. Whenever a warship came in, that family used to have parties and dances for the officers. And they used to borrow our piano. I remember composing a song saying that we want our piano back, and if it doesn't come back, I'm going to lock you up, or something like that. I remember that. That kind of thing. Of course, I went through the five-finger exercises which was characteristic of upwardly mobile West Indian children. And I had private lessons in school.

So I went to the first grade, then I went to the second, and then I skipped to the fourth, and then I skipped again. So I received, I skipped. Miss Cadugan was my teacher and Cadugan was a very, very light red-haired tall woman. Her hair was very negroid but red. And she was a good friend omy aunt and she was one of my fans. And later on when I became an ambassador and went down to Trinidad, she asked me to come to dinner and I did. But she used to say one thing about me. She said that whenever she looked in class, I would always be looking dead at her. I paid attention in class; I was always involved. And so I stayed in that. I went to parochial school. I used to go to church, you know. We went to church three times a day, at nine o'clock, matins, three o'clock, Sunday School and seven o'clock, evening songs, and I used to go. And then, of course, I used to sit in the front row and I'd sing louder than anybody else, imitating my grandfather. And, of course, my grandfather was something else ... (laughs) ... that's old man Skinner.

And then I became a member of the choir. And that was, of course, a big deal. So I remember my grandfather, my grandfather... (laughs)... my grandfather would have processions in the church, you know, and whenever there was a big holiday the whole choir would come down and make the rounds of the church. And my grandfather, he was always a half a note behind everybody ... (laughs) ... and there was always competition between myself and my grandfather, because there I would be among the sopranos and, of course, when I passed my grandfather he would just look at me, you know, and then his ... but then after church he'd say, “Boy, did you hear me, boy?” (laughter). So that that, was good. Then I left that school and went to what was called, what used to be a model school: Tranquility Government School. I remember my father came to visit and he took me down and he bought a lot of books for me. I remember that very well. You know, that was very impressive. All the books he'd given all the books I wanted, and I remember that was, that was good.

And, what kind of a boy was I? I suspect ... I had a bike and that, that was a problem with that bike, because I can't remember exactly how much the bike cost, but my father sent part of the money for the bike. But Mr. Francis was the one to provide most of the money for the bike. But for me it was important that my father get the credit for the bike. And, of course, my aunt didn't like that at all. She felt, “Oh, yes, you go to the Skinners again.” There was always this big thing between the Skinners and ... because, again, the point was that she had no children and plus her husband was a Portuguese and he had business and so on but ... no class. That was the point. You know. As they would say, they still smell of salt fish or something like that. They still smell of groceries. And it was funny, that's the truth. It was kind of, they were not, the Portuguese were not really considered as ... they were not part of the community. They were not ... they still were immigrants and still not well thought of and all that sort of thing, whereas the blacks and the Indians were, especially blacks, were, were, were important.

Talking about Indians, there were Indians in my block and my... sorry, the Indians were being acculturated then and my aunt had an Indian girl, Dolly, who was her god daughter, and Dolly lived with us. And Dolly sort of, although her mother was next door, across the street, Dolly sort of reareme, took care of me and all that sort of thing. But then I was very close to her mother. I used to call her mother “ma” and her father “pa,” and I was his black son. It was a very interesting kind of thing and acceptable in those days, and they say, well, you know, the Indians and the blacks don't want to see each other today, but that happened when I was a child.

But growing up as a boy, I guess I was a happy child, I think, interested in girls, I think, with very conscious differences between the girls with whom I went to school or who went to the sister school of Tranquility Boys, and Tranquility Girls School, and the girls on the block, who were of a different order, sort of. I knew about that.

Then I did well in Tranquility and then I began to get into trouble with my mother's sister. It stemmed from a number of things. One was I wanted to come here, the States. Secondly, I was growing up and, as I grew up I sort of got more and more involved with the Skinner family. There are a lot of boys and a lot of activities. I got involved with them and that created all sorts of tension. And then I got through school and then the question was, what to do? Because you see, there were a number of factors here which were interesting and it had to do with, again, the Skinners. By the time I was about sixteen, the question was, what was I going to do? You had three types of schools in the West Indies. You had parochial schools and they went all the way up to ... you can go all your life to parochial school, finish. Then you had the intermediate schools and you can go all your life to intermediate schools. Then you have the so-called colleges. You can almost go all your life to the so-called colleges.

Now the people who went to parochial schools ended up as, as workers — carpenters or what have you. Now many families used a strategy in those days. You would send a child to a parochial school until he or she was about ten, and then at ten you would send the

child to intermediate school until about fifteen. And then later on, you would take the child out of that and send that child on to college. Okay?

In terms of the Skinners, the Skinner's pattern, all of them except Uncle Harold went to parochial schools. Uncle Harold went on to intermediate school and I don't know the story there but somehow he fell back into the pattern because every one of his children except for the girl, who became a teacher, everyone was put to trade. Okay? So Uncle Ronald was put to trade as a bicycle mechanic and then he split and he went into auto mechanics and then he went into contracting and all that. So that it was structured and it was a very interesting structure based on color, also.

Well, of interest is that I went to parochial school, then I went to intermediate school. But I didn't take the next step to college and that wasn't going to take place until Teckle, my younger cousin, he made the steps from parochial, intermediate, and college. So he graduated from the local college. But my generation, I was still too early in that. So when I got through at sixteen, the question was, what was going to happen to me? And my grandfather didn't ... I had a cousin, who was light-skinned, his father was Indian and his mother was black, but he looked like Puerto Rican. So he was put into, he was gotten a job as a clerk. But in those days blacks were not clerks. Blacks were still by and large in the trades or blacks were doctors and lawyers, but not so much in this intermediate group. So I was caught outside the system at this point in time. And then the decision then was made by my grandmother, my father's mother then, and this time most of my relations, as I said, were the Skinners, was to send me to my uncle, Victor, my father's brother, to go to learn to be a carpenter. And so I did that. But Uncle Victor couldn't really deal with me. Or he dealt with me in a very interesting way. He was very critical of me for having been brought back to trade. He couldn't deal with that. He would say to me, well, what, what is a government school boy doing being a carpenter? And I couldn't do anything right, because in a way I shouldn't have been there. I was imposed on him by my grandmother. But he was treating me in a very interesting way, in retrospect.

He had become a foreman, carpenter, and all that. He would end up as the chief of works for the government — a big, big job. But then he was training me, he was really putting me through the ropes. From the basement in two years or so, I had gone through everything. In other words, he was training me to be foreman. And, of course, I didn't know that. He was training me to be foreman. Because he didn't feel that I belonged in trades, and if I had remained in Trinidad I, I suspect that by twenty-one I would have been into contracting and building. And I know it now, because Uncle Ronald went into that and all that sort of thing.

Well, I came here; my father finally arranged that. I got here. I came here during the war, and the question was, what would happen? The United States Government wasn't going to have me ... apparently what happened during the war was that a number of Englishmen came here to escape serving in '39. And apparently the British and the Americans signed something saying that this can't happen, that they would not permit British subjects of a certain age to be here without getting involved. So there was no possibility of Americans going over there to escape. So when I came here and my father said, “Well, you're here now, you know. What's going to happen?” I said, “Well, I ran into some West Indians, some kids I went to school with, and they were all eager to get into the service, and I was eager, too, to get into the service. On my eighteenth birthday, I went to 125th Street and Lenox and signed up and by August of that year, I got my greetings from the President and I went to Camp Upton and then I ended up in the 352nd Port Company of the 515th Port Battalion.

I did very well on my army scores and I wanted to go through OCS; I wanted to be an officer. But then we were, in '43, we were preparing the invasion and among other things, plus blacks, not too many blacks were being given the opportunity to go to OCS. So I went first of all to Camp, to Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania and I became a sergeant in my company, and then we went on to Norfolk. It was the first time I experienced racial discrimination; it was the first time. Trinidad is a very interesting country in the sense that,

as a child, you were conscious of the importance of the whites, the powerful whites. They were there, they had more money, they had more power, and they had prestige. Their power was economic and cultural; it was not physical. So whites were viewed as weak, physically weak. Whites were not seen as brilliant. They were not considered exceptionally smart in the sense that when I went to government school — we had about thirty kids in my class — of that five were whites. But they were not the formal scholars at all. They were just there. You didn't think about whites in terms of intelligence.

They were there. In my school I had two buddies: one was a guy called Ellis Maingot. He was French Creole. His family was of French background. And Harry Jordan was Indian. Those are two kids I was close to and there was no visiting Maingot in his house, you know. He would wait for me and I and Maingot would go together and so on, and from school, of course, he would stop off. I knew he had a sister and another brother. There were whites living on a block not too far away and you would play with them or beat them up or something like that, but there was no interaction with them of a social kind, not in my generation.

Ah, but, also whites lived in a special area. There were a few black families. Hannays, the lawyer, lived there and Bruce Procope they lived in that area, but, again, they were very upper-crust black folks. But the whites lived there and their streets were paved. And I remember getting a pair of skates. Only the main street, where I lived was paved, but where the whites lived all the streets were paved and we used to go there and skate. And every once in a while they would get the cops to chase us, because they'd be trying to get their siestas and whatever and we'd be making noise. And so that we knew that they were powerful enough, but the cops were black.

So that whites, there was no discrim ... they had their clubs and also the country club was segregated. And there was the Queens Park Hotel, I don't know if it was segregated or not, but blacks worked there. But I don't think blacks stayed there or whatever. So that whites were. You didn't encounter hostility and brutality from whites, or hostility. You didn't

have that. Segregation in the country club and the Queens Park Hotel, I think, but that was the extent of it.

I think when I was twelve I'd read Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery — I don't know how that book got to the house, but I found it. Also, I remember reading about black Americans. Mr. Fitz had a book from the First World War on black Americans, of the 369th Infantry, so I knew about black Americans in terms of, of Up From Slavery. I don't think that I related very much to slavery. I knew that my grandmother was born a slave, I knew that. But slavery didn't exist for us as ... it's something ... it was ... to us slavery was comparable to how the Jews may have seen slaves in Egypt. Slavery was not, slavery was ancient, distant. We had no views of that.

Africa was very much around. As a child I used to dance, I used to sneak away and go and dance Shango, and that was a big thrill to sneak out and to where people were dancing Shango. But it was weird, you know. As children, the next day we'd be in the yard just dancing and falling out and prancing and kicking up and all that sort of thing. So that that was part of the background. And, of course, the color thing was important, when it didn't clash with class, in which case then you ... a white-skinned black kid of a lower class would, would be called “whitey pokey” and would not have a good time. So you got that.

Talking about race, the other thing, of course, had to do with our perception of my generation of Afro-Americans. They were the models. And, of course, Cab Calloway was the hero. He was the hero. Plus in those days there were movies. In the Hollywood movies where there would be ... a black group would have, you know, would have, the possibility that a black group would come in and say something, black, primarily dancers, you know, in the white movie, but then they'd have the blacks. And then, of course, these blacks would be dressed in outlandish clothes. That for us, however, was, you know, as kids that was the rage. So the Afro-American was the model. And of course, you really made your name by going to the States. The States was the place where you had to go. Some people

went to Britain, but that was something else. The States, you know, you had to come to the States.

Of interest is the attitude toward the “darkie.” The darkie was Stepin' Fetchit and all those guys. Almost no identification. None. The darkie did not belong in the realm as Cab Calloway or Duke Ellington. We knew about the Duke Ellington, but they were like us ...

Q: ...interesting...

SKINNER: The Stepin' Fetchit was not, was not ... there was no identification at all with him as he was not a black person. He was not a black person. He was what he was, a clown, or something like. So it didn't, we didn't feel any sense of embarrassment or anything like that. What he did had no meaning for us. We were not ashamed of him. As a matter of fact, we'd laugh at him, because it had nothing to do with us. No one would try to imitate that, but Cab Calloway had his zoot suit and all that, oh my God! That was it. So that that was our view of race relations in my generation. Now, when I got here, of course, New York was New York. It was the Big Apple and all that, but, again, I saw whites doing things that I never saw whites do before. So that, the tailor downstairs was Jewish and he pressed our clothes; the Italian man at the corner, who shined your shoes, the ice people, were whites. So you got a different view of whites, but still, not from the perspective of discrimination.

The first time I ran into it was in the South. And by this time I was becoming exposed to the Afro-American view of race relations and, of course, I felt it keenly. I thought it was kind of stupid but also embarrassing. I remember Jane Eyre was playing at a movie in Newport News and I wanted to go, and they wouldn't let me in. I know that; I remember that. Also, I remember in Norfolk having to get to the bus, the back of the trolley and for us we were, we used to manhandle the whites on the way back to the back. I remember that.

I also remember Afro-American class. The color-class thing was here, except I think it was sharper here. It was sharper here in some interesting ways. I think you had more light-

skinned people in the lower classes in Trinidad than you had here — that's my perception of it — because the light-skinned guys in my outfit, most of them had been in college. They'd gone to Fisk, Talladega — I remember that — and they were different in the sense that, and this is interesting, because my perception is that they were different and I also knew that I didn't really belong. I was an outsider and people didn't really believe that I was from the West Indies. They thought I was a Geechie from South Carolina and they thought I was trying to pass as West Indian. But, also, I remember that it was my first-time perception of Harlem as a slum. A guy asked me where I was from. I said I was from 114th and Lenox. He said, “Oh, you live in the slum.” And it, you know, to me Harlem was all right. But he lived, he was from Sugar Hill. Now that's kind of funny.

I would say there were, that blacks were using education as a mark for social class. I hadn't had physics; physics wasn't taught in the intermediate schools, and I remember a conversation where they talked about physics and chemistry. And we didn't have that; I didn't have that. And I remember being out of it and feeling very left out, because I didn't belong with those people who were in college, because, you know, they drew the line. I used to hang out with people like Harry Jones and Doug and these guys from the ghettos. So I used to hang out with those guys.

At the same time, as soon as I got to the army, I began to go to school. I learned typing; I learned to read the slide rule, and as soon as I got overseas — I had French in high school. And when we got to England, then people accepted me for what I knew then. I knew pounds, shillings, pence, I knew that, and when there was a crap game, at the crap I became important, because I could understand that kind of crazy new money. So Sergeant Skinner was in demand, you know. And I could play cricket. Of course, I would get there, you know, a bit of cricket with the English people. So I knew all of that. So, you know, I began to shine in England.

Then, of course, we got to France, and I thought that my French was better than the French of anybody, you know, in my company. So I had a job in a duty NCO. I began to

hang onto the French a lot. I would go to French homes, and they all thought I was very clever. I was trying to, instead of making the use of the round, they thought I was trying to go into the families. Anyway, but I was interested in the French people and my French was good enough, so that I had this job, duty NCO, 36 hours on and, you know, 36 off. So I had that deal.

And it was uneventful. The Battle of the Bulge I wanted to ... General Lee said that we could, blacks could become, could join the Infantry. I wanted to go and Captain Walker said no. Eugene Walker said no, that he needed me, plus I might get killed and he wasn't going to let me do something like that. He thought I was crazy, so I didn't join the Infantry.

I got into one crazy fight in Marseilles. Myself and two guys went into a dance and there were whites there and a white paratrooper got on the stage and said, “This dance is for Americans only.” And like an idiot I said, “What do we look like? Do we look like Germans or Japs?” And he said to me, then he said — he was really taken aback by that, which is interesting. He said, “This dance is for whites only.” And we said, “Well, if you want us out then throw us out.” Well, that was kind of stupid. Of course, a fight ensued and the MPs came and we left. But that was stupid. We could have been killed.

So the war was over and then the question was, how does one, you know, to get home and they gave us points, you know, for every six months overseas, one point or something like that. We had to wait. And then in that period the army had a program training with Civilian Agencies. There were a number of colleges where you could go for one semester: Oxford, Cambridge, University of Paris, the University of Heidelberg, Geneva, Neuchatel, Freiburg. So I applied. And Captain, Lieutenant Rappaport called me in and said, “Sergeant Skinner, you have this request here to go to school in Switzerland. The company might leave in two months and if you leave for Switzerland, you would miss the company. So what do you want to do.” I said, “Well, I intend to go to college anyway, so I want to go.”

So I went to Switzerland. I went to Switzerland, the University of Neuchatel for three months. I lived with a Swiss family and ... that was in '46, and I left there in March '46 ... I just missed my company. My company had come through Le Havre about two weeks before I did. And I did meet some of them even here at Fort Dix. So I came out and I was demobilized on the 16th April of 1946.

Came right out and went to school. I went to Washington Irving Evening High School, and in those days we had what is called 52-20. All soldiers coming out could get twenty dollars for fifty-two weeks until you got yourself a job. So I came out and immediately signed up for my 52-20. And I remember I went to the Bronx, Third Avenue, some place, and I was going to take time off to ... I was hoping to get to college by September. So I wanted to go to school and get my 52-20. I had some savings bonds and some money I'd saved during the war. And I went there and the woman wanted me to take a job as a porter, and that flipped me out. I was very upset and I told her, “No, I don't want a job right away; I just came out.” By this time I could understand this woman because we were soldiers, you know. There were soldiers there who would come back a long time and they would fool around. So I guess she was being very probably bureaucratic, but I swore ... that woman, I'm going to come back here one of these days ... I'll come here one of these days and show you. But I was furious.

Anyway, I came and I went down to Washington Irving Evening High School and then I sent away for my transcripts from the West Indies. And, also, when I was in France, I had taken correspondence courses from the University of Wisconsin and I'd taken French, I'd taken psychology. Those were the courses they were giving. I had my grades. I'd taken comparative anatomy, Swiss culture, French, and English literature, I'd taken in Switzerland. So I had those grades. I didn't have American history, so from April until the end of June, I read American history. In those days, GIs could go to a class and could enter the class any time. Any time you wanted a class, even high school, you know, you didn't have to wait. So I went in. And I took the Regents and I got 90 in American history

because I read it, I read the book, oh, my God, and I read it until I probably forgot it, too. But I did that.

During that period I'd met Thelma and ... I met her and ... that was, I was already in school going to evening high school and then, as soon as I came back I saw some of my friends who had come back before I did, and I told them I wanted to go to college. They said, they laughed, they said, “You can't get in.” Apparently, they had tried to get in and they couldn't get in. And when I came back, I just went down to the Veterans Administration — I think it was 250 something Seventh Avenue — and the guy gave me an application for NYU (New York University) uptown, only one. I had, I used to live down here, across the park, on Lenox and 114th. I used to come through here. In those days, you know, this was white man's territory. So I knew about Columbia and I ... but the notion of here was alien. I don't think I knew very much about City (University) or ... I didn't know very much about many schools, so I applied and the dean, Osmond Drake, told me to come up for an interview and he told me, he looked at my record, and he said, “Well, go over to that shelf and get a book.” I did. He said, “Read it.” I did. He said, and then he asked questions. Well, I figured that my memory is as good as his, so I passed that. And then he said, “Well, you can't come.” I said, “I want to,” I said, “I want to come in the summer of 1947.” He said, “No. You've got to wait 'till the fall of '47.” All right. It meant I had to wait for a whole year.

Meanwhile I got married in December of '46. It was a very rapid courtship. I'd seen Thelma just before I went into the service, and — very attractive and all that sort of thing — I was conscious, well, our ... there was opposition to our marriage. The fact that she was American was very important to my relatives, and I shot that down in short order. I couldn't deal with that one. In retrospect, they didn't handle it well. What they could have done was to say, why don't you go on home to the West Indies to visit your parents. If I'd done that, I might have been trapped there, but, anyway, they opposed and I couldn't deal with that.

I was conscious of ... there wasn't too much difference between our levels of education, in the sense that she had gone through junior high and I think one might compare

intermediate schools with junior high level, might have. But there's one thing I had, which was this ... you know, I intended to go on. Right from the very beginning I tried to encourage her to go to school, because I was ... there was no reason for her not to go to school, because we got married in '46 and she didn't get pregnant until '48.

And, going to school, we lived with her mother for a while and then we moved, because I didn't think that that household was conducive to anything. So we moved and lived in a room, a small little kitchenette, and then we moved to Brooklyn. I had to go from Brooklyn to University Heights every day. And it was hard, because I was getting the GI Bill only. I used to have fifteen cents a day: five cents to go, five cents to come, five cents for coffee. That was that. And classes would be over on a Friday, and Monday I would be down at Warren Street getting a job. I did everything. I was a porter ... at the Goldsmith basement at 77 Nassau Street. I also had a job once pushing one of those carts down in Thirty-Fourth Street being...

Q: ... garment industry.

SKINNER: Yes. I remember being afraid of that. That was tough; all the cars down there. But I made it, I made it through that. The first kid was born, then I was going to school and working, and then the second one was born and Thelma didn't want ... couldn't work though then, or whatever. But then I decided I was going to be a dentist, which was the thing that all bright, ambitious West Indian boys wanted to do. I had to take the pre-med course up at the Heights — to be anybody you had to be in that group — so I did the pre-med course and then discovered anthropology when I did my social science requirement.

By then a number of factors had started to impinge. One was ... I think the economic factor entered. I don't think that I believed that I could have afforded dental school. It was never conscious; it was never discussed. But anthropology became important to me. Once I discovered it, I thought “Oh, my God, here it was!” It was something that made sense to me. It explained who I was, what I was and all that sort of thing. It made sense to me. I

applied to Northwestern, to study with Herskovitz, and he turned me down. About that school, that school was a shock to me. I thought I was pretty good. My first semester was disastrous. By the second semester I had chemistry, physics, French, English and math, or something like that. And, you know, it was hard. Many of the Jewish kids up there were very good, and it was the first time I had met bright, white kids. They were good.

Q: And was this the NYU uptown campus?

SKINNER: Yes, uptown. These were guys who couldn't get into Columbia or Princeton and Yale because of discrimination. They were good enough for that. And the NYU uptown was going to be their last hurrah to make Phi Beta Kappa, to get into med school.

And they had, those kids had, you had guys who knew French taking elementary French, guys who did advanced ... who went to Bronx High School of Science doing elementary chemistry. The wanted to make sure they get ... they knew about Phi Beta Kappa. I didn't know anything about that stuff. And ... but by the time I got to be a junior, I was doing very well. So I graduated with an 89.2 average, or something like that. I missed Phi Beta Kappa. But I thought that, I'd applied to go to Northwestern because I wanted to study Africa. Herskovitz at that point in time had only trained two blacks; he didn't believe in training blacks to be Africanists. Hugh Smythe studied with Herskovitz, but Hugh was not permitted to go into the field. Hugh did a library thesis. Herskovitz didn't think Afro-Americans could be objective about Africa. Anyway, I'll never forget that and I will never, as long as I live, permit a white person to have that much power again over blacks as far as Africa is concerned. Of course, the irony was I won the Herskovitz prize anyway.

John Landgraf, who taught me at NYU uptown, was writing a dissertation here at Columbia and I asked him about Columbia, and he said he would recommend me, and he did, and I came to Columbia.

Q: What year was that year in?

SKINNER: '51. By the time I got to Columbia, I was into academia in the sense that the training up at the Heights was rigid, very elitist. There was a man called St. Stunton. He used to say that, you don't flunk out of med school when you leave here; we flunk you out right here. So I got accustomed to hard work and no nonsense up at the Heights.

I also got involved with politics for a little while. We formed the Heights chapter of the NAACP when I was in the Heights. And I became the president of that after a while, and we began to ... we had a number of fights with the YPA (Young Progressors of America); they were leftist. And they also wanted to manipulate blacks, and I didn't like that. There's a text book by Steele and Commager that had some derogatory remarks about blacks. The fight was whether or not to try for a new edition, which would leave out these negative things, or ban the book. The YPA wanted to ban the book, but I didn't want that. I wanted the new edition. I remember being very conscious of that.

I was a member of the Glee club. I liked that. Chapel choir, I liked that. I think I was the first black to be a member of the Chapel choir. Then I came here and ... I was working ... that was a very crazy year because I was working, I used to work at Junior Clothing. That was Twenty Third Street off Seventh. And I would work there on Saturdays, on holidays, I would work there, and I would clean — I was a porter — I would clean, I would clean on Saturdays. At the same time I was working on my Master's. Now, in those days, you normally, around here, you take about two or three years for a Master's. I did it in one year. How I did it was to, we had, you know, two major examinations which were almost qualifying examinations. And, of course, once I discovered that once I did pass the first examination was when I could continue.

I started to write my Master's essay beginning the second semester. So I think I'm probably one of the few guys in that whole book, Columbia catalogue, with a Master's in one year. I came in '51; '52 had my Master's. And my Master's essay was on African monarchies and I discovered the Mossi in the process of writing that. So I did that, and that year was crucial for another reason. One day I came home, one night I came home —

no, after I'd gotten, no, it was during that period, because I think what happened was that I started working in the library from here, Butler, on three. Miss Stublefield (?) was there on the third floor. I became a page. So I used to work in the morning and then from six to ten in the stacks, or you know, around. And one night I got home about eleven o'clock and I was washing my hands preparatory to eating and Thelma said to me, “What are you really working on now?” I said to myself, “My God, what a question!” I said, “I'm working on a Master's and if I'm good enough, I'll continue for the Ph.D.” And she said, “Don't you think that it's about time you stopped being a school boy and get a job and work and take care of your family?” I said, “Well, I'll tell you what. On Monday morning you go on down to Domestic Relations Court and you find out how much it is that black men in my position must give their wives, and I will give that money to you if I have to work sixteen hours a day, but I am not going to quit.”

Things were rocky, you know, but I wasn't going to quit. Things were rough but, we ate a lot of neck bones and we used to go down to Delancey Street to buy clothing and all that sort of thing. But my father was backing me, you know, psychologically, and then in the summers I would work two jobs sometimes. One summer I worked in Goldsmith. It was a crazy summer. I worked from 8:30 to 4:30, and then I went home and slept until about 11:00, and from 12:00 until 8:00 I worked as a bus boy in the Hudson Terminal. That was about two or three blocks from Goldsmith. So I would leave there and get to Goldsmith at 8:30, and I did that for the summer. Almost died I remember. So it was that kind of thing, and by this point in time my GI Bill had run out. The GI Bill took me, it took through the BA, one year for the Master's and one half a semester. And in those days one could work in the library and get tuition credits.

Q: ...Really!

SKINNER: That's right. They changed that. I remember when they changed it, but you could do that and I did that. And I used to ... I paid my ... that's how I got through.

Q: I was going to ask you if you had any scholarship funds or anything like that. You know that kind of thing is only given to full-time...

SKINNER: And they changed it. At one point in time now, you can't even work, I don't think you work part-time the way we used to do it.

Q: To even work in the libraries now you must be a full-time student.

SKINNER: Yes, it's crazy, but, you know, in my days you wouldn't, no, no we used to. I used to split the day and you also got tuition for working the summers. So that's how I finished my residence here. Then I was working. I was doing well and one day I had, as I was coming through, then I had one of those offices on the sixth floor, Butler, and Mort Fried came up there and said to me, “Elliott, I notice that you have read all the books on Guiana.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Why?” I said I was looking at the Africans who had gone to Guiana. He said, “Well, where do you want to do your field work?” I said, “Oh, I want to go to Africa.” He said, “Well, if I can get you some money would you to go Guiana with me? I'll look at the Chinese and you can look at the blacks.” I said, “Fine.” Then I finished my examination for the Ph.D. I did very well — then applied to the John Hay Whitney Opportunity Fellowship and I met Bob Weaver.

I won the Opportunity Fellowship. That was my first fellowship. I also received a departmental fellowship from Columbia and that was the first time that ... I'd start to get back at those people who were, who were criticizing me for being a school boy, because that fellowship enabled me to take the entire family to Guiana. And it was also my first plane flight, too.

So we spent five months in bush Guiana and I came back and wrote my dissertation. I received an assistantship in the Department of Anthropology working with Fried and I finished my dissertation and wrote, ... applied to the Ford Foundation for an area fellowship program, for a fellowship to go to Africa. So I had my Ph.D. in one hand and a

Ford Foundation fellowship in the other hand. And in 1955, September, I left New York on the Liberte to go to Britain, then France and then, ultimately, to West Africa.

That's how I got involved and then I went from Dakar to Bamako, from there to Mopti and then to Ouagadougou, and then I did field work on Mossi migration. I was very interested in the political organization of the Mossi people because they had not been, they had retained their political organization intact since about the 15th century. I was interested in that. But I didn't think the Ford Foundation would give money for that, so I applied to do work on Mossi migration, and I did work on Mossi migration.

It was during the interviewing for the foreign area fellowship that I met E. Franklin Frazier for the first time. He said to me ... (laughs) ...”Mr. Skinner, your budget is very small. Are you independently wealthy?” I said, “No.” He said, “Well, that's okay, we'll take care of it.” And he did. I think I got thirteen thousand for eighteen months, which in those days was a lot of money. And so I did some work. I did work. I stayed in the field for fourteen months and I came back to the States by Pan Am. And the question then was, what to do?

Dr. Arensberg had tried to get me a job at St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, but there was nothing. So they decided to give me a job here ... I'd done well and I was interviewed by Lawrence Chamberlain, who was dean of Columbia College then, and I was named Visiting Assistant Professor. And the reason for that was that Wagley said that since, if we named you an instructor and we let you go, people will say, well, why? But if you were named Visiting, they will know that you're a visiting professor. But the point was, where was I visiting from? (laughs) ...

Q: Yes.

SKINNER: Anyway, I came and I began to work on my book rapidly. I published an article in the American Anthropologist, which was, which was for, for a young professor that was, that was to enter the Bible right away almost. It was something. I began to do well here, but the time came for me to end my visit because people had gone away and they had

just come back. My visit was extended for two years. And when I was told, Wagley called me in and told me, “Well, Elliott, you know you'll have to find a permanent place now.” I called John Landgraf, who was my professor at NYU, and John said, well, I said, “John, you know, is there a job at NYU?” I was his first Ph.D. and all of that, and I was a loyal son of NYU. He said, “Well, what's going on at Columbia? Why is Columbia letting you go?” I said, “Well, he'll explain.” He said, “Let me call up Chuck and find out.” So he called up Chuck and he found that, indeed my visit had come to an end. So I went on down to NYU and that's, that really stopped my book. It was interesting, because my book was almost finished — my book on the Mossi — and got down to NYU. It was a different environment down there; the people there were not publishing and it was almost an atmosphere of not wanting you to publish. It was kind of a very strange thing.

And then, of course, Africa began to hit the headlines and I was asked to teach on “Sunrise Semester,” WCBS. So taught African ... I became a TV star then ... (laughs) ... and didn't capitalize on that. I think it was the Nelson Book Company that taped one of my lectures and reduced it to writing and edited it and showed it to me, and told me that this is almost an instant book. I was very upset by that and said, “No. Who gave you the right?” And that was kind of stupid. Looking back, that was stupid; that was dumb. (laughs) So I did that and I kept on just publishing, you know, like a beaver.

And then, I was angry because when I left here ... Well, three of us took examinations: myself, Pete Vayda and Claire Jacobson, and some other people who were there. I came number one. So I beat Pete. Pete was going to college and I beat Pete on that examination.

Then Pete went out to British Columbia and I went to NYU. Then I discovered that they brought him back. In those days, Columbia College had its own section of Anthropology and General Studies had its own. And Mort Fried who had taken me to British Guiana was in charge of me and Harris was involved in Columbia College. Fried was in charge of General Studies. Now Wagley told me that the time had come to, you know, I had to find a

job. I discovered that a year after that, Fried had hired Pete and brought Pete back from, from British Columbia. And I thought that was unfair, because I thought I had beaten Pete in the examination. I suspect that Pete had the skills that Mort wanted, or something like that, but I didn't like that.

One day Pete called me up and asked me to teach an evening class in General Studies. And I cussed him out ... (laughs) ... and he told Wagley about it and Wagley said, “Oh, I understand you just cussed us out. Well, okay, we'll bring you back at Columbia if you work hard, so...”

Q: ... if you worked hard?

SKINNER: Yes. So about a year after that Joe Greenberg called and said, “Elliott, I'm going away for a year. Can you give my course on Africa?” I said, “Fine.” So I did that. Then I think a year after that Arensberg called me and said, “Elliott, we would like you to join the faculty.” And that happened and I became the first black tenured faculty in Columbia and probably in the Ivy League. At that point...

Q: ...and on that note ... (laughter) ... It is now about two minutes to one. I know you have an appointment with your father. Shall we call this session to an end?

SKINNER: Right.

Q: Thank you very much, Dr. Skinner. And when we meet again, and that will be when you return for the Fall term here at the University, then we will, you will share with us?

SKINNER: Right.

Q: Today is January 20, 1982. Dr. Skinner, at our last meeting in August of 1981, we ended with your return to Columbia University as an Associate Professor of Anthropology

and you were there in that position from '63 to '66. Could you begin with your return to Columbia, please?

SKINNER: Well, the return to Columbia was a result of my anger about the way in which I left Columbia. Part of the problem was when I was still in the field in 1957, I had written to the chairman of the department indicating an interest in the job and apparently he did send my name around to a number of colleges, including a small college upstate New York, Canton, New York, but there were few takers. He had also sent my name to the University of Rochester and nothing happened, and there was some concern there and the department decided that perhaps the best thing to do with me was to take me for a while and put their stamp of approval on me and sell me to some other university. Their concern, then, was what to do about that. To just bring me in as an instructor in what had been a visiting slot was held not to be good, because you don't normally, don't have visiting instructors. Instructors come in and if they do well, they are promoted to Assistant Professor; if they do badly, they are just let go. And since they had decided that this will only be a visiting one, they were caught in a bind, so they decided to name me Visiting Assistant Professor. The only problem was that I was visiting from the field, so I very often jokingly said to my friends, I was visiting from the Mossi.

Now just about that time — I'd come back in January — and to the surprise of many people, I went back to the library and worked as a page, probably the first page in the history of Columbia with a Ph.D. in field work, but I don't think I tried for a job. I came back in February; I was already engaged for September. So I decided to work in the library when Sol Tax from Chicago came through, and Sol wanted to find out whether or not I would come to Chicago. But he didn't offer me a job. He talked about my field notes, and talked about getting me a chance to write up my field data. And he asked me how much I was making. I suspect it was ... My God, I don't remember what it was. But it was just a page in the library and I thought it didn't make any sense. But he seemed interested in that possibility and Charles Wagley, who was then chairman, I think, felt that I should consider

it. But I didn't think I wanted to leave New York. And since Sol Tax didn't make a firm offer, I remained.

Now, I started then in '57. I thought I had done a very good job. I had my first article published in the American Anthropologist in '58. I was unknown to the people in the field, so I thought that race had no bearing on that publication. And I was working busily on my book, but the time had come to move on because I think Joe Greenberg, whom I had replaced, had returned to Columbia and I was kept on an extra year. But then I remembered Wagley saying to me one day that, well, Elliott, you've got to find something else.

By that time I was moonlighting at NYU, in the evening, teaching their graduate course on Africa. And I saw John Landgraf, who was my undergraduate professor — I was his first Ph.D. — and I told him what had happened and he said, well, let me see what's going on. And in fact, he called up Charles Wagley and asked him why I was leaving and apparently Chuck said, well, people have come back from leave or from the field.

So, I went down, still in NYU, but I didn't, I felt that I had published an article in the Bible so to speak. My book was coming; I was getting along very well with the students in Columbia College, and people had gotten accustomed to seeing me around. And, frankly, I didn't want to leave Columbia, but then I left. And about the year after I left, Mort Fried, who had taken me to British Guiana to do field work, and who then was representative for General Studies, in those days General Studies had its own budget and so did Columbia College. And I had been on the budget of Columbia College. Mort Fried wanted somebody to work with him in G.S. and he brought back Peter Vayda from British Columbia. Now I had been a graduate student with Peter; I had done better than Pete in the Ph.D. examinations, and I was kind of angry with that. I felt that if Mort wanted a professor, he should have called me. But in retrospect, Greenberg was here teaching Africa, so perhaps he needed somebody from the Pacific, but Margaret Mead was here also. Anyway, I didn't like that. And to make matters worse, Pete was here about one year and he was in charge of G.S.

and called me up to teach ... to moonlight at Columbia. Well, I cussed him out, (laugh) and Wagley was told about that and Wagley got sore, and I think that he felt that I was being unfair to Columbia. Anyway, by this time, I was into teaching on WCBS Sunrise Semester and so on. I was getting a kind of reputation in the field and when Joe Greenberg went off again, the new chairman, Arensberg, invited me to moonlight. By this time I couldn't turn down that slot because after all, Joe was very helpful to me as a graduate student and everything, plus I had made my point and I was not moonlighting in General Studies. I was moonlighting then in the graduate department.

And while there, it turned out that Joe was thinking of going off to Stanford. And I'd gone to a party at Mort Fried's house and Arensberg asked whether or not I would want to come back to Columbia. Of course, the answer was yes, and I came back to Columbia.

The problem then was whether or not I would come back here or go off to Africa on an Urban Studies Program that was being financed by Paul Bohanan at Northwestern. Well, we worked a deal where I came back to Columbia for a year and I came back in '63 as the first black, a tenured professor, at Columbia in its history, and, I think, the first black with tenure in the Ivy Leagues, in '63.

And I stayed around for a year, then in '64, I went off to Upper Volta to do the urban study. And it might have been there that the State Department had heard about my work. But for a long time I had been lecturing at the Foreign Service Institute. About once a month or so, I would go down and give a lecture to the Foreign Service officers going off to Africa, so that I was sort of involved with the State Department. I had met the Ambassador to Upper Volta. We knew each other. He knew of my interest there, and it might have been that kind of thing that ultimately led to the ambassadorship.

Anyway, I came back to the United States in January of 1965 and kept on lecturing, and it was in '65 that the President of Upper Volta came to the United States on an official visit. I was invited to the White House. The scene was interesting and this is probably an

apocryphal story; I don't know how true it is. But the guests were all lined up and as I was coming through, the President of Upper Volta, Maurice Yam#ogo, recognized me, and I spoke to him in More, and the President was there and so was Dean Rusk and so was Ambassador Estes. And another oral tradition has it that Johnson turned to Dean Rusk and said, “Make that man Ambassador.” (laugh) I don't know how true it was. Anyway, that was about the end of 1965.

I came back and I was busily finishing my book on... By this time, the book on the Mossi of Upper Volta had been published by Stanford University Press, and I was busily working up the book on Ouagadougou. And I was working one Saturday, around ... I think it must have been around March or February, March, when I got a call — I was in my office working away — and the operator said, “The Secretary wants to talk to you.” And we chatted. He was intrigued that I was in my office and I was intrigued that he was in his office. So he said, “When will you next be in Washington?” I said, “Well, it so happens I'll be coming down to lecture at the Foreign Service Institute.” And he said, “Well, when you come down, come over to the Department, enter into the diplomatic entrance and come upstairs and talk to me.” So I said, “Fine.” And then it occurred to me that perhaps this might have been a joke. So I went into the office, I looked around and only Marvin Harris was there working away busily, and I said, “Marvin, you know something? I just spoke to Dean Rusk.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “Are you sure?” I said, “Yeah.” “Wait a minute, let me check.” So he called up the central — the operator and said; “Did Dr. Skinner receive a call from Washington?” (laugh) She said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, you did talk to him.” So we speculated as to what it might have been. And by this time Hugh Smythe was on board; Frank Williams was on board; Mercer Cook was also on board. And it was obvious, I think, to me that it might have been that. Anyway, when I went down to ... It was very funny. I went down to give my lecture and in the morning sitting downstairs waiting for the class to start, one of the officers who worked with the class said to me, “How are things going?” I said, “Fine. But you know, I have to meet the Secretary of State.” He said, “What?” So he got excited and he told the woman who ...

Ann Reid who actually ran the program, “Ann, Dr. Skinner has to see the Secretary.” Well, she said ... it was very interesting ... she said, “But you can't see him because you have my lecture to give.” So I said, “Well, fine. I'll wait until afterwards.” ... laugh ... It turned out that that poor kid was so flustered that she called up and cancelled my appointment so that I could give her lecture ... laugh ... and took me all the way over from Arlington Towers to the Secretary, again, of course, probably the first time she had gotten that close to the Secretary. (laughter) And we talked. We talked as one professor to another professor. He said, “No, you don't have to say right off the bat whether or not you want it. You can think about it.” I said, no, it was all right. He said okay, but fine. You'll hear from us.

I heard nothing for a while and then, I think, around April, my neighbors began to talk about people speaking, asking questions. And my colleagues in the department would look at me knowingly, smiling, because they had been contacted. And when two men asked to see me and identified themselves as FBI, they said, “May we ask you a question?” I said, “Yeah.” They said, “Well, we cannot find out what you did in 19...1940 something. We cannot find out what you did that summer.” So I said, “Well, let's see, Oh! I was working at Globe Mail.” They said, “Okay, we'll check with Globe Mail and we'll get back to you.” They called me later on that day and said: “Yes, now we have everything on you.” Apparently they were checking; they came up with blank. And then, I think it was in May, I got a call from the White House saying that they wanted to find out whether or not I'm a Democrat or a Republican. It turns out that they didn't know. I said, of course, I'm a Democrat, which I am, or was. And they said, well, okay.

Then I got a call from Dean Rusk himself. He said, “We wanted to know ... laugh ... whether you were still interested because we had just gotten an agr#ment from the government of Upper Volta about your being named.” I said, “Oh, fine. I am still interested.” And that night it was on WINS and so on and so forth, and that was it.

Of course, everyone was quite exited about that, and I went into the department's office and Murphy was just about ready to take upon the chairmanship. And my courses were

all organized, and in about fifteen minutes that guy had taken every single course and assigned it to somebody else. It took only fifteen minutes to separate me completely from the university, and I got a feeling that, my God, is this what happens when you die? And it was a weird feeling ... that, in about fifteen minutes, that is it. Your courses are assigned to other people.

Well, I think the most interesting thing about that whole episode was the reaction of the department. Here were people who were very involved with Vietnam. As a matter of fact, some of our students were the leaders in the anti-Vietnam movement. My department, later on, would be involved in the bust at Columbia, as a function of Vietnam and everything like that. But they had no questions whatsoever of my accepting that job. They were all excited. And again, it was another view of what happens to people when they're suddenly elevated, if they were pleased to know that either one of their friends or professor in their university had become a United States Ambassador. It was true up in Harvard University. I happened to deal with Grayson Kirk there, Dave Truman; they all wanted to see me, and I was very, very pleased with that. So I took off then and left Columbia, went on to Washington and then went on to Upper Volta.

Q: When you returned from Upper Volta, you returned directly to Columbia University. Right? Did you have any difficulty getting back into the academic vicinity?

SKINNER: Well, I think this is interesting because this overlaps with possibly something that Frank Williams may have said. Frank had spent Christmas of 1968 — no '69 or '68 or '69, I can't remember which is which — with me in Upper Volta and he announced that he was going back to Columbia. He was being offered a job at Columbia and that he was going to head the Urban Center and that he was going to, I think he said, transform the university. I had a very strange reaction, and my reaction was what? This man is crazy. I felt very much a Columbia professor in the face of an outsider who was saying something about transforming the university. It was a very strange reaction and I subsequently have wondered about that, wondered about university people in the face of outsiders. Anyway,

I came. ... so Frank had come back, apparently and the Urban Center was, was all right. I came back and, I think, the thing that surprised the people at the university, well ... Before I came back, Mort Fried and others ... Mort Fried had continued to play a very important role in General Studies, and Mort was interested in the possibility of my becoming Dean of General Studies. And given the climate of the day, he thought that perhaps General Studies might address itself to the black community. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I think I felt that the position of blacks in the United States was such that if you transform General Studies into a black university, instead of ... if you named a black as Dean of General Studies, instead of the black person bringing General Studies up to the status of the other divisions — and General Studies had had a difficult time under its white deans because Columbia College did not want these failures, who were then seen as the retreads in General Studies, didn't want them to get a Columbia degree in the first place, didn't want them around campus, and Louis Hacker did a good job and finally got G.S. respected. But I don't think that Columbia College or the university was prepared to deal fairly with G.S., and I felt that with a black dean of G.S., G.S. would have been shunted aside and would not really be integrated. As it turns out, G.S. now is part of the university. But I didn't think that university was ready for that move.

So I also remember thinking that this is the classic slum role that blacks have played. They have always moved blacks into slum areas and then blamed blacks for turning these areas into slums. G.S. was not well thought of at the university, and I didn't want to be saddled with that problem. So that that didn't work out.

Then the department wanted to make me ... head of the African Institute. Now I would have wanted that job. I really felt that I ... that could have been a very good job to have had. It turned out that L. Gray Cowan didn't want the job, didn't want to leave the job and Cordier, who was then president, did not want to ask him to leave. Now, Gray Cowan had come into the university through General Studies and he never really made it into the department of political science. He never quite made it. He was always marginal to the department of political science. And the department knew that ... the department knew that

the African Studies Institute really needed somebody who was organic to the university to head it. By this time, the department ... they were taking over like Latin America. Wagley was chairman of that, director of the Latin American Institute. Mort Fried was running the China Institute, the Asian Institute, and I think the department wanted to take over Africa, as part of its local imperialism at the university. But Cordier did not agree, so I came back and just fitted right into the department. I took my courses. People were surprised that I didn't ask to be honored. I just moved right in and began to teach.

The university then was different. Columbia had gone through a bust in 1968; my own son was put in jail. No, he wasn't in jail; he was part of the group that seized Hamilton Hall. Some of my colleagues, knowing that I was up in Upper Volta, were trying to protect him and all; they didn't want him to be arrested with the other people. So the department and the university had gone through a very difficult period with Vietnam and the whole thing.

As part of that whole reaction, of course, the Ford Foundation had given ten million dollars and. Frank William had been brought in. The university had money for a number of professors. The thing about it, no one asked that I be given one of the chairs with the Ford money. It was interesting. Chuck Hamilton got one, and I came back and I found on board Chuck Hamilton; Wilfred Cartey was around — had been around for a long time — but Chuck Hamilton and Hollis Lynch were around. I remember there was a meeting of the black faculty administrators at the Urban Center. Frank was there; Frank was doing a good job there. But I remember going in and Mrs. Callender, Eugene Callender's wife, was around also, and Barbara Wheeler was there. I don't know if you were there that day, you, Celestine Tutt. Anyway, Chuck looked around and said: “Well, since we're all new here, let's talk.” So I was intrigued ... (laugh) ... and mad. New here. Come off it, man! Anyway, I decided that I couldn't say a word. I couldn't say a word, because to have said no, I was here before you folks — would have generated such hostility and all, you know, tragedy, elitism and all that, so I said nothing. (laughs) And later on ... only later on, that they began

to realize that no, I had been around and so on, so I ended up then as chairman of the whatever that organization was.

My concern about the university then was that the university was making some attempts to deal with blacks, like I was involved with the, I got on to the admissions committee of the college. I worked with a dean called Hovde to, when the black studies, black students were trying to seize a room in Hadley to transform it into the Malcolm X Lounge. I was cussed by the black students, some of whom are now members, fully established members of the alumni association of Columbia College, but then they were really “mf” and all that sort of thing — it is interesting.

Columbia was trying to deal with the issue. There was a lot of posturing by blacks on campus. In the Urban Center, together with Chuck Hamilton, we tried to be serious. We had a program of research on black and urban studies. But I was concerned that the ... the Urban Center was marginal to the university. Frank Williams was not succeeding in turning the university around. I remember also looking for the future of that institution, advising a young woman not to make her career there — she turned out to be a librarian, kind of good but I felt that ... kind of strange, but she looked at me with a very strange look when I said, “Get out of here,” but was what she finally did. And in time the Urban Center lost all its funds and in retrospect, the university did not do very much with ten million dollars that it had received from Ford. Only one black professor was hired: Chuck Hamilton.

Later on when I was chairman with Chuck, we tried to get money that had been allocated to a chair in Economics, which the Economics Department didn't want, couldn't fill, because they wanted Andrew Bremer, who was not available. We got money from that chair to hire two young blacks: Wilber Rich in Political Science and Leith Mullings in Anthropology. The money for the third chair went to Herb Gans, a white sociologist and urbanologist. And as of this date, the money for the Urban chair ... the deal with Chuck Hamilton was that when the time came for Wilber Rich to come up for tenure, that given the number of white political scientists, we would try to get him a position in Political

Science without using the chair and later on try to get the chair for Mullings. Well, Rich didn't do very well in Political Science and he is no longer around and Leith is now being ... as of this date, Leith is being considered for tenure. Whether she gets it is anybody's guess. But if she gets it, then, hopefully, their chair will come to her.

So that since that period then, I continued to take an interest in foreign affairs, and I ran into one of my colleagues, Sam Adams, who had been in Niger. He had come to Niger just before I left Upper Volta. He had come over, and Nixon had brought him back as the administrator for Africa AID. And Sam was concerned about the level of the black input into the AID structure. And Sam decided then to do something about that. Meanwhile, other things had happened. Just after I returned from Africa, there was a meeting of the African Studies Association in Montreal. Apparently, there were problems with that organization which had been created around 1956, I think it was 1956, I think. Of interest, Hugh Smythe, who became United States Ambassador to Syria and then Malta, Hugh had taken me to that meeting. We had driven all the way from New York to Evanston and that meeting was designed to set up a number of African Studies Programs: one at Columbia, one at Boston, UCLA and Evanston.

E. Franklin Frazier was on a desk at Howard which had started African Studies, was not even considered as the place where an African Studies Program should have been created. Oh, incidentally, Wisconsin had a center. Blacks had felt badly about that and the blacks did try to enter the African Studies Association. People like Horace Mann Bond showed up, Logan showed up, but they had belonged to a different generation. They were not considered Africanists; they were considered laymen. But the younger African Scholars, the black scholars interested in Africa, myself, Kilson and others, we were accepted in the Association and we played an important role in the organization. And I did not realize it then; I found out later on that I had taken part in every meeting, either to give a paper or to make comments or something.

But the blacks didn't like the way in which the organization was functioning. Our elders have not been accepted, and I think only Hugh Smythe got close to the inner workings, and that was the function of his relationship with Herskovitz, because Hugh had gotten his Ph.D. in Northwestern. The rest of us were angry young Turks. And even though, I think to be fair to those people, they were moving gradually, and I think fairness or blackism, you could say that, I was not discriminated against. That is the truth. Just before going off to Upper Volta, I was on the nomination committee, and I had nominated James Gibbs of Stanford to be a member of the board. So blacks were of my generation, blacks from Harvard, Columbia, Yale, the big schools, we were being integrated into the organization. But the ASA got involved, as many of the other organizations then, with the black focus movement and there was a rump session in Los Angeles, I think, in '68. Nineteen sixty-nine, when I came back, I was in Montreal when the blacks took over the organization. And initially I was not about to enter that, because I didn't know the people. These were young people, younger people. They were not Africanists; they were not in African Studies but they were angry and, in a way, my students were the ones to get me involved: Gloria Marshall, Herschelle Challenor, they were the ones who got me involved. As a matter of fact, it was Herschelle who called me and said, “Where were you last night?” Well, I was off partying with my friends. Apparently, they were having a caucus downstairs or some place. And I said, well, I was not around. So I came downstairs, having breakfast, and even so, I was having breakfast with Mike Horowitz, a friend of mine at Columbia, and I left breakfast and went into the room where the blacks were there milling around, and then they seized the microphone. I had never seen that before. I remember feeling a bit of excitement. And then I went up front and Bill Schwab from Temple got very angry and said, “Well, what are you guys doing? You guys are not even Africanists.” Now that got me mad. Although Bill, when he was at Columbia for a year or so was friendly to me and all that sort of thing, Bill was giving Gloria Marshall, my student, my first black Ph.D., a hard time, so much so that one day I threatened him and told him that I never wanted to see him appear at any session where Gloria was giving a paper, and talking nonsense. Bill had never learned Yoruba. Gloria had done better field work, and in his phony accent, he

would try to put her down. I told him, no, that I didn't consider that to be even scholarly; it was racism; and you don't treat racism in a scholarly manner. You ... (laughs) ... go to blows with racism.

And in a very interesting way, it was Bill's action that really got me angry, and I decided then — well, I wasn't decided; I was still milling around when a Kenyan student who knew who I was, said to me that I should come with them to a meeting with the board. So I found myself then, on the other side, suddenly transformed from a member of, I guess the establishment, into the radical group, and I found myself confronting Greg Cowan, Villacasy, an African, and others, and the things that really got me was the contempt, the contemption to these black people, and it was that more than anything else that got me to join with the people of the black caucus.

Anyway, that thing disrupted the entire meeting; people like Leone Damas, George Balandier, many people there, some sympathetic to the blacks and some were not. People were concerned that blacks from the ... the Americans were washing their dirty linen in Montreal. And we came back then; the meeting was over; we came back.

But I soon discovered that I was not very pleased with the level of scholarship that the black caucus, which had now been transformed into the African Heritage Association, was producing. It became quite clear to me then, shortly, that Africa had ceased to be the focus, that the focus was very much black but close to the work that the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, founded by Carter G. Woodson, the work that they were doing. And I was still very much concerned with an African interest. I took part in the AHSA meeting at Howard in 1970, then I ran the meeting in Baton Rouge in '71, I think. But by that time, it was quite clear that we were not going to do very much in terms of scholarship, so I lost interest.

And then something else happened. The ASA had commissioned Adelaide Gulliver, Cromwell Hill Gulliver, to invite black Africanists to Jamaica, to try to find out exactly what

had been wanted: a kind of peace offering. And although I was not very happy with AHSA, I felt that we could not let ASA rip off the blacks who were doing work in African Studies. So that got nowhere; that meeting got nowhere because I discouraged it ... I discouraged the blacks from doing anything. I said we should stay in with AHSA.

But as I lost interest in AHSA, I found myself at a loss for something to do. I remember at that point in time going down to the Phelps-Stokes Fund, where Frank had gone, and suggesting to him that I could work with him on some kind of think-tank for Africa. By this time, however, Frank had taken on Fred Arkhurst, a Ghanaian, who had been an ambassador from Ghana to the United States, the United Nations, and Frank wanted me to work with Fred. I didn't accept that; I didn't think that, first of all, that Frank should have used a Ghanaian to be involved with blacks in U.S. policy. And later on, of course, Fred turned out to be a disaster because I don't think he really respected Afro-Americans. So that left me sort of drifting, and I remember going down to Washington to a meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and telling Adelaide Hill that I think the time had come for a new organization. Adelaide said no, hold it because Samuel Adams was thinking of calling a conference at Ailey House. Now, I went there and I met people like ... I met Bob Kitchen, Frank, no, if Frank was there, he came and left early or something like that. Frank; may have been there. But Sam Adams, Herschelle, Cleveland Dennard, who is now president of Atlanta, Willard Johnson of MIT, I don't think Kilson was there, but Hugh Smythe was there, Beverly Carter was there, Rudy Aggrey was there, a number of the important persons from academia and the State Department and philanthropic organizations, they all went there.

Then there was a conflict and it might be presumptuous for me to say, but the contract was between myself and Herschelle, my student, because Herschelle, who is now the UNESCO representative in Washington, Herschelle, who had worked with Martin Luther King and had come out of the civil rights movement, I had taken Herschelle to Africa with me in 1962 with Jim Robinson's Crossroads group. Herschelle was an activist and Herschelle was trying, I think, to transform that group into an organization which, in my

estimation, was not scholarly. I don't know what she thought of Sam Adams, but I had a feeling that Herschelle was not about to let any organization develop which was too closely linked to the State Department or to the American establishment.

Q: Why?

SKINNER: Herschelle really wanted an organization which would almost have an adversary relationship to the United States on behalf of Africa. All right. We left Ailey House and as Sam probably knows, probably has spoken about that, and there was going to be a meeting in Washington of the people who had been at the Ailey House. Now it turned out that at that meeting, that there were a number of things going on. There was Herschelle and a number of her friends who were interested in mobilizing the blacks who had expertise in Africa for a lobby; that was that group. And then there was another group led by Cleveland Dennard, who was then president of WTI, Washington Technical Institute, who wanted to form an organization which would have been a consultant type of organization like many that existed in Washington at that period, where blacks would have had access to money that Sam would have somehow allocated from the AID budget to do work, development work in Africa. And then there were guys like myself who were interested in the scholarly aspects of the African enterprise. I was joined by Hugh Smythe and the ... Herschelle and Jim Turner and others they went off. They said that they wanted nothing to do with the government; they went off on that basis. Then Hugh Smythe, among others, but I think it was Hugh specifically, I don't know if Hugh knew Dennard or trusted that whole Washington mafia.

But Hugh felt that the organization should have a scholarly basis, and out of that group emerged the African-American Scholars Council, and I was named chairman of the board. And as chairman of the board of that organization, then we began to do a lot of work. We decided to divide ... Sam was very concerned then about the Sahel, very concerned about it ... and he was insisting that blacks play a role in informing the United States about the Sahel. Meanwhile, I got involved with another group called Relief for Africans in Need in

the Sahel and we were raising money, and we had a big benefit at St. John the Divine and so on and so forth. So in this, from '73 on, the Sahel began to attract attention.

Meanwhile, the Scholars Council was doing very well, produced a number of PhDs. both among Africans and Afro-Americans, and I then got involved in a project in which I developed a small little program where, very specifically to please Sam, I got involved in what is now called developmental anthropology. I took a man, he was a Japanese member of AID, I took him throughout West Africa, the Western Sudan, to familiarize him with the situation there, and out of that came a research project to look at the adaptive strategies used by three groups of persons: agriculturalists, pastoralists and urban squatters throughout the Sahel.

The problem with that project was that we could not find black scholars to run it, to do the work. And here's where the contradictions which, the dilemma of Afro-Americans, was very, very clear. The project that I developed, was developed from a scholarly, theoretically and all that sort of thing. It was the kind of research project that AID expected. My problem was to find people to work. I could find nobody until one of my students, a white student at Columbia, came in one day and said to me, “Well, Dr. Skinner, Well, I want to go to the field.” He had been a Peace Corps volunteer; he had worked in Togo, spoke French, and it suddenly occurred to me that I could make Waldstein a member of the team. I kidded him and I asked him whether he had black ancestors, and he said not that he knew of, but his folks were in Egypt a long time ago so perhaps ... well, anyway.

So AID was involved. Then I got a call from Eliot Berg from Michigan. There was a young woman called Theresa Webb who wanted to go to Mozambique. I thought she was crazy because there was a war going on in Mozambique, but I said that if she wanted, I could make her a part of my team. So I got Theresa on board. She went off to Dijon or some place like that to learn French and ultimately she got a Ph.D. out of that.

Then I met a black woman from Jamaica, Grace Hemmings, at Yale. She became part of the team and went off to East Upper Volta. And we were searching for somebody to go to Adams' country, Niger, and a blonde young man had read about the project, left Cornell and went all the way down to Washington and said he wanted to be on board. And Blaun, who was running the project for me, said, “Well, look, Dr. Skinner, you can look, look and look, and look for a black, but if you want this project to meet its deadline, here is this man.” So it turned out then we had a project stimulated in part by a black man who was an AID man, run by me and had two black women and two white men. I guess the “brothers,” “the brothers” were not around.

So that the Scholars Council began to work, was doing good work, but then the Scholars Council got into trouble. And I think the trouble started when Sam was still head of AID. Sam had ... because, you see, this period, the blacks were in a way getting themselves together. Charles Diggs, who was head of the sub-committee on Africa for the House had gotten Herschelle to come on down to work with him. At that point in time, there were a number of hearings on Africa. I know that Sam testified and so did Frank Williams and so did I, a number of us testified, Mercer Cook. And Diggs wanted Gola Butcher, who worked with him, to have a conference on economic problems of Africa. And Sam asked me, as the chairman of the board of the Scholars Council, to give money to Gola and I saw no harm in that. As a matter of fact, I think I gave her twenty thousand dollars ($20,000), and I gave a paper. But Gola came back for more money and the executive director of Scholars Council, a black woman who sort of resented, this black woman had been in AID and sort of resented Gola —personality may have something to do with other factors in our history, and when Gola came back, I was all in favor. But this woman who ran Scholars Council suggested that no, she didn't want to give the money and suggested that she knew that it would not have been well received in AID, AID knowing that Sam was giving money to help someone who was involved with the legislative branch and so on and so forth.

Now Gola got very angry about that and, okay, now then, of course, there was a change of administration, no, not yet, the administration hadn't changed yet. But the Nixon Administration was in the process of trying a new approach to southern Africa. This would be linked with Kissinger making a number of trips, shuttle diplomacy between Kissinger, Ian Smith and Vorster in South Africa. At that point, Sam was let go. Again, I don't know what he says about this; I'm just saying what I know about this. I've seen Sam at a meeting, a conference in Virginia, where he had given money ... Sam was busily trying his best, as I saw it, to get blacks involved in this process of aid and scholarship and so on. He had given some money to people in Virginia. I had gone down with the executive director of the Scholars Council and I saw Sam there on his way to Texas. I think his mother was ill or something like that. And by the time he got back to Washington, he was out. It was one of the characteristics of many of those of the State Department, that they can cut you off. Sometimes you read about your dismissal in the New York Times othe Washington Post. And he was disturbed by that, but then this coincided with Kissinger's need to have some information on Zimbabwe. Kissinger was talking about making a two-billion-dollar grant to Zimbabwe as part of the deal by which then Ian Smith and his people would move out of power. By this time, I was out at Stanford. I had gone to the Center for Advanced Studies in Behavioral Sciences, sort of a think tank at Stanford University.

Q: What year was this?

SKINNER: This was in 1975. I had taken over the chairmanship of the department and at the end of that period, I had gone to the think-tank. But let me backtrack a little bit here, because what happened was that after I had settled myself in the department, I became quite concerned of the lack of blacks in anthropology. We just weren't getting the students. And George Bond, who had replaced me when I had gone off to Africa, and that is another story, but who had been kept on, we were able to convince the Department of Anthropology to give us some money to make a trip to the South, visiting black colleges, trying to recruit graduate students. I visited Savannah State; I visited Paine College,

Knoxville. I had never seen so many black colleges in my life, but George took the whole group of them. I took a whole group of them. I think we got about six students.

Q: How did you select the colleges?

SKINNER: They were black.

Q: But other than that?

SKINNER: That's all. We were on our way to a meeting in New Orleans, of the meeting of the anthropologists. And as we were going down...

Q: You just hit the ones...

SKINNER: Right. He took a group and I took another group. While I was down there, I got a call from President Cordier: I should come and see him as soon as I got back. Okay, but — I should come and see him and he talked to me about ... he said, well, Gray Cowan was thinking of leaving the directorship of the African Institute, whether or not I would be interested. I said, well, I would let him know.

Then there was a meeting in San Diego of the American Anthropological Association, and Sinclair Drake, Bill Shack, who is now dean, graduate dean at Berkeley, they cornered me and said, “Look, Elliott, we hear that you have a problem. The problem you have is that Cordier wants you to be director of the Institute and the Department of Anthropology wants you to be chairman,” which was true. Sinclair said, “Look, Elliott, you are the Franz Boas professor and we need that chairmanship. You see, you have no choice.” He said, “For the first time a black person has taken over an organic department in the Ivy League, and we want that.” It was almost categorical — you cannot do that — I said, “Okay.” I don't remember if I called him Dr. Drake or Sinclair, whatever.

I remember coming back and telling Hollis Lynch that I had this talk with Drake and that I will tell Cordier that I would not accept the directorship of the African Institute, but I would

turn it over to him and I will take over the chairmanship of the Anthropology Department. Anyway, Cordier finally called and I told him no, that I could not. He said “We will give you the job for a year.” So I sort of ... when he called, regardless of what Drake and others felt, I really wanted the African Institute, but the department was insisting that I should be chairman, and they ... for many reasons, they felt that the department needed a strong chairman. It needed somebody who had not been around in '68, when they'd all become radical. I was now an establishment ... an establishment thing and all that sort of thing, and they wanted to sort of get them back into the university.

So I was still toying with the notion until Cordier said to me, “We will make you chairman ... (laughs) ... for a year and we'll see what happens.” I got cold. I said, “No way.” And I told him about the African Institute, the feeling that the blacks had on campus that they were not welcome at the African Institute, and that I didn't think that there should be a permanent chairman, director of the African Institute, it should be a three-year rotating chairmanship, and that I would recommend Hollis. Of interest is that, when I told Hollis about this thing — I went to his house — he said, “Well, do you mean that you want me to take the chairmanship until you get through the chairmanship of the department?” I said, “No, I want you to take it.”

Well, Hollis had taken that over and, of course, I became chairman and I did the thing ... chairmanship for three years — from 1972 to 1975. And then I went off to Stanford. While I was there, I hired a young woman ... I decided to get rid of the executive director, who wasn't able to raise funds and who had alienated Gola and a number of individuals. And Sam, then the executive director of African American Council — now Sam was replaced by a guy called Scott. Nixon names Scott in Sam's place. Then in what one calls a 'golden handshake move,' when people leave the Foreign Service or a large organization they are usually given a grant which will tie them over until they've found something else. Sam was given ... AID gave Sam a project to look at both Rhodesia and Namibia, southwest Africa, to assess its basic infrastructure so that if and when the Rhodesian Zimbabweans and Namibians had accepted Kissinger's evolving policy, Unites States would have a basis of

allocating the two billion dollars to the Rhodesian Zimbabweans and the Namibians. Sam asked me whether or not Scholars Council would house that. I said yes.

Now that move, Sam came in and Sam brought his own team ... and, you know, who was I to say that Sam could not bring his own team? After all, he had been instrumental in founding Scholars Council; he had supported Scholars Council all along the line, and here he wanted a base, a vehicle by which he could get this grant. I said fine. Sam brought in his own team and that raised all sorts of problems. Why? The black intellectual community was hostile to the study in the first place.

Q: Why?

SKINNER: The background to all this was Nixon's NASM, National Security Memorandum 39, in which Nixon had said that the whites in southern Africa were there to stay. It was only when Portugal fell, there was a revolution in Portugal, and Angola and Mozambique and Guinea Bissau became independent and the whole strategy of Nixon toward southern Africa was falling apart, that Kissinger began to move around trying to save that whole area. The black intellectual community felt that southern Africa was in the right, and they felt that anything Nixon would do would be counter-productive and inimical to what was going on. And they were nasty about Sam's accepting the research proposal. But the point was that the State Department had about three proposals. There was an organization with a million or three million dollars to do a study of that area; Sam's project was about 500,000. And there was an internal group in the State Department itself looking at the same issues. So my feeling was that Sam was an American, had been an American Ambassador; he had helped Scholars Council. But the people who wanted to attack Scholars Council or didn't want to have anything to do with the government, they began then to beat a drum against Sam Adams, and I thought it was unfair and I supported Sam Adams. I did suggest, however, that Sam should get some black scholars, and he did get some Zimbabweans, some of whom are like Chirenge, who is not in Salisbury, Harare, he came from Harvard to work on the project, and they brought out a fairly interesting project

which demonstrated that Rhodesia Zimbabwe had a very interesting infrastructure, and that is still very true.

But that was followed by Watergate and then by the Ford presidency, and then Carter came in. Now when Carter came in, Carter brought in Gola Butcher. Gola never forgot that she was not given money to finish writing up the data from her conference. Meanwhile, the executive director of Scholars Council had fired a number of persons who worked with the organization, and AID decided that it would do an audit of Scholars Council. That led Gola not to lose any interest in the organization, and I then tried to get rid of the executive director because I told her, I begged her not to fire anybody, especially since many of the people who were being fired had worked for about three or four years with AID and were known there. As it turned out, we were audited to death. Nothing was ever discovered amiss; Scholars Council was never found to have misused a penny. Some of the kids who were in the field did not send back receipts, but there was never any skullduggery. The board decided that it didn't want to fire the executive director. I resigned from the chairmanship and I resigned ... in a way, history must be served ... I resigned because the board did not want to get rid of the executive director. That killed the organization. I knew it would happen and I let it happen. In retrospect, I don't think I should have. But without being the head of the organization, the organization had no intellectual or diplomatic clout and the organization just folded up. Again, it's taking a paddle to kill a gnat, and that ... I feel terrible about that, because we lost another one of the organizations that could have done much good work.

By that time I began to lose interest in organizations per se. I felt that we were not serious when it finally turned out there were more Africans doing serious work at Scholars Council than Afro-Americans. We were not being serious in terms of that. And meanwhile, I was aware that Herschelle was involved with a number of organizations and I would always pay my money to — whether it was an African Forum or what have you — I would always

pay money, but I told them, no, I will not come to your meetings, I will not be on your board. I am through, finished.

Meanwhile a number of organizations were formed, very often under the leadership of Herschelle, until Trans-Africa emerged as what Herschelle always wanted: a lobby. But by this time, I'd go down to their dinners, I would do work for them, but I lost interest in organizations dealing with Africa, in a sense that, no, no, I don't want to have to fight black people for leadership of organizations when in fact the biggest battles must be done with whites and not by blacks. I still see the major issue in our society as not competition between blacks but competition between blacks and whites for leadership with respect to African situations.

Meanwhile, my academic career continued to do very well. One of the ironies is that my book, African Urban Life: The Transformation of Ouagadougou, published by Princeton University Press, won the Herskovitz prize, a prize given by the African Studies Association for the best book written on Africa. I could not even go to take the prize because I had left the ASA in a huff ... (laugh) ... That taught me something. Mbook was never recognized by the AHSA, which is funny, and in terms of associating with organizations dealing with Africa, I decided not to ...

I feel that there is a problem here with respect to blacks and U.S. policy towards Africa. I applaud the Trans-Africa approach. I contribute to the organization; I contribute to Africare. But when Frank Williams became a member of the board of the Council of Foreign Relations, he did something which I think we cannot praise him enough for, and this is to get blacks into the Council. It comes as a surprise that I came back from Upper Volta in '69 and Hugh Smythe followed me, subsequently, and it was only through the good offices of Frank, around '76, I think that I became a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Now that's unthinkable. That's stupid. I had spent three years as U.S. Ambassador and you mean to say this organization could not accept me as a member? I had not ... I know something about it; I didn't apply to it, that is true. But I knew it was always headed by

David Rockefeller; Kissinger; Brzezinski; all these guys were members of it, but I wasn't. And it was only, I think, until Frank became important that the organization is now thrown open to blacks and blacks are playing an important -role.

Now, because of the Foreign Relations, that is my major source of interest in Africa. Frank gets me down sometime with ... whenever he has people like Chester Crocker down at Phelps-Stokes and so on. By and large, that's the extent of my African interest as far as dealing with organizations.

Meanwhile, in terms of my academic career, I've moved on two levels: one is to look at the whole question of blacks and blacks and U.S. policy towards Africa. I have long wanted to do something on that and Frank had Fred Arkhurst to do something, and I thought that the subject of blacks in U.S. policy towards Africa had been becoming a bit trendy, in the sense that everybody was doing, but I felt that I had to say something about it, or I have to. And when I received a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington for 1980, I went down there to the Wilson Center and I am currently working on blacks in U.S. policy, but I am doing a very scholarly task, and that is, I am going to all of the archives and really looking at the correspondence between blacks and the for ... and the State Department and so on. And I want to do a very detailed study of this. My concern still is that blacks have not been willing to do the kind of hard work that's necessary. We are still not into scholarship, and I've been fascinated by the work of the early black ambassadors — people like Henry Smythe and others. They were good, and their stories haven't been told. I think I want to do that. I'll bring that study up to 1960 so as not to deal with my own period, and the period of some of my contemporaries. And that I consider to be something that belongs to the black realm of scholarship.

In anthropology, I was impressed with the work of my students in the Sahel, and although I promised them that I will not be or become a developmental anthropologist, all the work that they did and the paradigms I developed for them, it is quite clear to me then that the future of anthropology has to do with the way in which small-scale societies are ultimately

integrated into the emerging global civilization. So my interest in the global civilization enables me to deal with anthropological problems, but also to link myself to many of the elders in the profession, people like Kroeber and others, Julian Steward, my professors, who were interested in their later years in the larger picture of the discipline. So in a very interesting way, I am trying to link the reality of the small villages to what is quite clear, that what is happening now is that what I have been calling the global civilization is spreading and there is more homogeneity now than we ever had in the history of the species. So I am concerned about linking the small villages to the global system and the problem of mediating structures. And that's my major anthropological interest at this point. I haven't published seriously on this. The methodology is going to be difficult; the question of aggregating data and analyzing data, these are problems that still must be worked out. It might well be, but I will not do it. I will just train students in new techniques, using computers and so on, to do that. That's the nature of my current interest.

I have on stream now two books ... well, in fact, three books. One is called The Afro-American Dilemma. I'm trying to look at the Afro-Americans within the context of the expansion of Europe and what is critical theoretically from me is that I see the Afro-American in contrast to other blacks as being the most interesting product of the expansion of the West, a population which was brought into the belly of the beast, or through the most dynamic of the societies which emerged from Western Europe. But a group which because of its presence within the most dynamic of the Western-derived societies, could not be integrated into that society. But as the West retreats and as European man loses his pre-eminence in the world system, the Afro-American will finally be integrated. In other words, the end of the empire. I see it as providing for the first time in the history of this people the opportunity to be accepted as citizens of a state which is no longer pre-eminent in the world system. That I am calling the Afro-American dilemma, finally be accepted when the society which finally accepts them is no longer dominant. That is the dilemma. So I want to look at that.

The other book I am working on, and I have submitted to Howard University Press a number of chapters, has to do with blacks and U.S. policy, and the book I am going to talk to Columbia about has to do with Africa and Africans in the diaspora, the contemporialities on problems. And in that book I wanted to deal with the problems of racial solidarity, the nation state and the emerging phenomenon of class. African people became a race as a function of white racism before they were nations, not state nations, nations, good activities of various kinds. They became a race or people in dialectical opposition to whites, who made them a race. Out of that then came the emergency of black nationalism led by the United States blacks and, in the process, blacks in the U.S. stimulated, supported the emergence of nation states among black peoples, which, ironically, these nation states have started to separate blacks from the race into Americans, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Trinidadians, Barbadians, and this reality is something that many Afro-Americans cannot deal with. But the Ghanaians are quite comfortable being Ghanaian or whatever, and that's a problem.

But to make matters worse, the emergence of these nation states has led, within these states, to the stratification of elites against the poor. So you have the emerging phenomena of class in, among black people and this is recognized clearly in the independent African states and the Caribbean states. Afro-Americans don't want to recognize ... Afro-Americans don't recognize the nation state among blacks; they are insulted when they go to Ghana and are asked to produce a passport and a visa, and as far as the question of class, they don't want to recognize class in these independent states because class, as seen among Afro-Americans from the beginning, always made for division and weakness. So that we are dealing then with three realities: the racial reality, which is still very much present among Afro-Americans; the reality of the nation state, which is very much present among people in the Caribbean and in Africa, and the emerging phenomenon of class, which seems destined to link the wealthy of the world together in a kind of Marxian dialectic. And I want to explore these contradictions as black people can deal with these issues from their various perspectives.

Q: Thank you, Dr. Skinner. You are indeed involved in some very exciting research, and I am sure the scholarly world is eagerly awaiting your findings. This concludes our series of oral history interviews and on behalf of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, thank you again for participating in the project.

End of interview